

INITIATIVE WITHIN THE PHILOSOPHY OF AUFTRAGSTAKTIK
DETERMINING FACTORS OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF
INITIATIVE IN THE GERMAN ARMY 1806-1955

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Art of War Scholars

by

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14. ABSTRACT <p>The philosophy of <i>Auftragstaktik</i> is aimed at initiative of subordinates within and outside of the scope provided by the commander's intent. While acting within the intent, in general, does not cause problems, acting in alteration of or opposite to given orders regularly will. Deviating from orders within the philosophy of <i>Auftragstaktik</i> is justified by the <i>grundlegende Lageänderung</i>—fundamental change of situation, or if acting upon a higher responsibility to the unit.</p> <p>In four, partly overlapping phases this thesis examines the factors determining the use of initiative while applying <i>Auftragstaktik</i> in the German military forces from 1806 until today.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The emergence of <i>Auftragstaktik</i>, from Clausewitz's understanding of war to the total initiative of field commanders in Moltke's age and World War I, 1806-1918. 2. Low tactical level initiative in the synchronized warfare of World War I, 1915-1918. 3. An army shaped for initiative versus detailed tactical control by Hitler, 1919-1945. 4. The ethical component of initiative—responsibility for the preservation of units to <i>Innere Führung</i>, 1941-1955. <p>Using doctrinal references and analysis of actions of commanders in the different wars, the thesis examines the influence of technological developments, culture, societal factors and political influences, as well as developments in warfare.</p>					
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ABSTRACT

INITIATIVE WITHIN THE PHILOSOPHY OF AUFTRAGSTAKTIK,
DETERMINING FACTORS OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF INITIATIVE IN THE
GERMAN ARMY 1806-1955, by LTC Martin Sonnenberger, 102 pages.

The philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* is aimed at initiative of subordinates within and outside of the scope provided by the commander's intent. While acting within the intent, in general, does not cause problems, acting in alteration of or opposite to given orders regularly will. Deviating from orders within the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* is justified by the *grundlegende Lageänderung*—fundamental change of situation, or if acting upon a higher responsibility to the unit.

In four, partly overlapping phases this thesis examines the factors determining the use of initiative while applying *Auftragstaktik* in the German military forces from 1806 until today.

1. The emergence of *Auftragstaktik*, from Clausewitz's understanding of war to the total initiative of field commanders in Moltke's age and World War I, 1806-1918.
2. Low tactical level initiative in the synchronized warfare of World War I, 1915-1918.
3. An army shaped for initiative versus detailed tactical control by Hitler, 1919-1945.
4. The ethical component of initiative—responsibility for the preservation of units to *Innere Führung*, 1941-1955.

Using doctrinal references and analysis of actions of commanders in the different wars, the thesis examines the influence of technological developments, culture, societal factors and political influences, as well as developments in warfare.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On October 12-13, the French *bataillon carré* swung to the left. With Lannes in lead, it contacted the Prussians over the Saale at Jena. By the morning of October 14, Napoleon had concentrated the better part of two full corps in a small bridgehead over the Saale, seized on Lannes's initiative the night before. With Napoleon looking on, Lannes led off the attack in the morning against the Prussian right. Two divisions advanced abreast (Gazan on the left and Suchet on the right) and drove a wedge into Prussian positions. Augereau soon joined in to the left of Lannes. Ney arrived on the battlefield and, on his own initiative, wedged himself in between his fellow Marshals without orders. He impetuously made for some tense moments as his leading units outstripped the two flanking corps, but his neighbors soon fought their way up to his relief.

Things weren't going well for the Prussians, but as the infantry of Major General von Grawert's division arrived, it seemed as if Hohenlohe might yet save something of his day. In one of those moments seemingly invented to demonstrate the changeover from one military era to another, however, they deployed far too slowly for the attack. "Solemnly, as if on the parade ground," they halted and formed line within range of the French skirmishers in front of the village of Vierzeñheiligen.¹

— Robert Citino, *The German Way of War*

Background

For modern warfare the military revolution following the French Revolution and the establishment of the citizen soldier motivated by nationalism liberated the commanders from the restrictions put upon them in the age of Cabinet Wars.² The growth of the armies to unprecedented levels prohibited the centralized command and control from the *Feldherrnhügel*, as idealized by Frederick the Great of Prussia.³ It also led to dispersing units into elements to avoid overstraining the available road infrastructure and permit logistical supply by foraging, thus imposing the need for decentralized execution.⁴ In Prussia, the "crushing defeat"⁵ at Jena and Auerstädt broke up the gerontocracy of state and army and permitted a fundamental transformation of the army by the reformers

around Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August von Gneisenau. The reform gave birth to both the development of a highly qualified corps of staff officers and the idea of a professional ethos aiming at “aptitude and eagerness for independent action”⁶—initiative.

Since then initiative has played a key role in the developing concept of *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies;⁷ the quick and decisive defeats of Austria in 1866 and of the French Army in 1870 have led to discussions and its adoption in different other armies as well. *Auftragstaktik* started off as the idea of decentralized command based upon the mindset that commanders and soldiers who cannot be controlled have to act independently within their superior’s intent. The doctrinal concept was then further refined as chapter two of this thesis depicts; the term itself can be found from 1906 on.⁸ The U.S. Army with the Doctrine 2015 set of publications explicitly introduced the philosophy of Mission Command, a derivative from *Auftragstaktik* intended to “exercise disciplined initiative [to] create opportunity by taking action to develop the situation.”⁹

This thesis analyses the historic understanding of initiative against the background of the current doctrinal framework of *Auftragstaktik* as defined by the *Bundeswehr*. As far as U.S. doctrinal terms equate to the definition and understanding in the *Bundeswehr* concept of *Auftragstaktik* they are used for ease of understanding. However, those terms have to be read against the overall concept of *Auftragstaktik*, not simply compared against the U.S. Mission Command Philosophy.

Aim of the Thesis

The aim of this work is to identify factors that historically have influenced or determined the acceptable extent of initiative during the application of *Auftragstaktik* in

the Prussian and German armies over the last two centuries. This serves discussions about the future use of *Auftragstaktik* and Mission Command to enable distinguishing between the demanded respectively accepted use of initiative and destructive disobedience.

Problem Statement

The philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* aims at the initiative of subordinates within and outside of the scope provided by the higher commander's intent. In general, acting within that intent as authorized by trust and mutual understanding does not cause problems, however acting in alteration of or opposite to given orders regularly will. Deviating from orders is within the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* justified by the *grundlegende Lageänderung*—fundamental change in situation, or if acting upon a higher responsibility.

Different historical examples suggest that one can assess the validity of deviating from orders only after the fact, based on the resulting tactical success or failure. If *Auftragstaktik* in the *Bundeswehr* enables and demands initiative, parameters have to be in place to qualify before the fact the acceptable degree of initiative rather than afterwards.

Methodical Approach

This section describes the methodical approach to the thesis. It consists of three elements, the framework of reference, which depicts the background of the concept of *Auftragstaktik* in the German Army, the definition of initiative in the context of this thesis, and thirdly the model, which is used for analyzing the different forms of initiative as well as the timeframes for the analysis in the subsequent chapters.

Framework of Reference

From the earliest depictions of humans using what had been hunting tools as weapons to fight each other in battles men have sought to gain advantages through improved weapons—technology—and specific forms or techniques of application—what later became doctrine.¹⁰ What Geoffrey Parker describes as the five principles of the western way of war perpetuated and increased the struggle for advantages through technological developments and the doctrinal role of the individual as a part of a larger military body.¹¹

The Israeli scholar Meir Finkel in his book *On Flexibility* depicts the frequent failure of attempts to properly identify the future threats caused by the adversary's efforts to gain a technological or doctrinal advantage prior to the outbreak of a conflict routinely fail.¹² Thus, he suggests that the solution to countering technological and doctrinal surprise lies in the ability to react flexibly to the initial surprise.¹³ While his model aims at explaining how to develop a capability of change, in this context it serves the purpose of providing a logical background to the concept of initiative.

The model describes four flexibility strata:

1. Conceptual and doctrinal flexibility, an atmosphere that encourages lower-ranking commanders to challenge concepts and doctrine,
2. Organizational and technological flexibility, diversity and redundancy as well as technological versatility and changeability,
3. Flexibility in command and cognitive skills, consisting of mental flexibility and flexible command, and
4. Fast learning, including a rapid circulation of lessons.¹⁴

While the first two strata describe the development of an army before a conflict and the last one is aimed at learning, the third stratum describes the reaction to surprise caused by technological or doctrinal change during a conflict.

The stratum of cognitive and command and control flexibility thus describes the effect that different armies want to achieve when planning meets the reality of warfare. Consequently, it constitutes an answer to the challenges Carl von Clausewitz describes as resulting from the difficulties in gaining proper intelligence; although outside of Finkel's focus, it in addition seems to be expedient to use it in order to counter surprise from friction and chance.¹⁵

National concepts of *Auftragstaktik* and mission command as they are used by different armies are the results of distinct historical developments and habitual as well as deliberate application of the idea that decentralized execution of operations best answers the above mentioned challenges to military commanders. The Prusso-German concept of *Auftragstaktik*, role model for the adaption by many armies, sets the background for the analysis conducted in this thesis. It is applied in the current doctrinal version as effective in the German Army.

Initiative

Finkel describes two elements in his third stratum: "Command flexibility [which] grants the commander the freedom to make on-the-spot decisions"¹⁶ and cognitive flexibility, referring to the trait of a military commander "to respond quickly to battlefield contingencies by improvising solutions that result in rapid recovery."¹⁷ While cognitive flexibility is a function of the selection and education of officers, in the context of this

thesis command flexibility is defined by the *Auftragstaktik* doctrine and its contemporary interpretations.

Defining the term “initiative” sets up some challenges. German doctrine literally refers to initiative in the context of the U.S. Army’s definition of operational initiative.¹⁸ Other terms used in this context are freedom in the way subordinate commanders execute their missions and deviate from the mission. In the absence of a German doctrinal definition, initiative within Finkel’s above-mentioned framework is to be understood as the actions resulting from the combination of both cognitive and command flexibility. This basic definition for initiative will be categorized and related to the other terms, as reflected in the German Army philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*, in the following section.

The basic definition also corresponds to the U.S. Army’s definition of “individual initiative—[t]he willingness to act in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise”¹⁹ and the description of “disciplined initiative[, the] . . . action in absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise”²⁰ as used in U.S. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) No. 6-0.

Categories of Initiative

As indicated, initiative in the Bundeswehr doctrine is not explicitly defined, nor are the cases and circumstances in which it is to be executed narrowly prescribed, which is caused by its generally more descriptive character compared to U.S. Army doctrine. A full comprehension of the character of *Auftragstaktik* can thus only be achieved by the study of doctrine combined with experience gained through military training and education. This section categorizes three different forms of initiative contained in the

character of *Auftragstaktik*. The three forms are determined by the conditions set up for their execution and their degree of freedom against the higher commander's directive as represented by his intent and the mission given to his subordinate.²¹

The basic category of initiative is the commander's leeway, how to execute his mission. Based on the higher commander's intent, which depicts how the operation is to unfold in terms of a scheme of maneuver and which objectives are to be achieved, the subordinate commanders analyze their mission and identify their essential contribution to the superior's operation. Within this framework *Auftragstaktik* grants subordinate commanders leeway how to execute their missions. The degree of freedom of action depends on the type of mission.

Constituting a general rule (and a core element of *Auftragstaktik*) there are no preset conditions in the execution of this form of initiative but it also remains constrained within the boundaries of the unit's mission. Compared to the U.S. system of mission command, similarities are visible; however in practice German orders tend to be limited to the bare minimum of tasks and one purpose per unit. The U.S. system of assigning tasks, which each include detailed directives and a purpose, is much more detailed and restrictive.²²

The second category of initiative is derived from the acknowledgement that the situation in a battle can change to an extent that may render obsolete higher commander's planning how his operation is to unfold and the missions for his subordinates derived thereof. The doctrinal requirement for this is a fundamental change in the situation, which has occurred when the preconditions the mission is based on no longer exist. The concept of fundamental change in the situation includes also the necessity for rapid action and the

inability to obtain or wait for the superior commander's decision. If it becomes necessary to deviate from the mission, the higher commander's intent remains the basis for subordinate commander's decisions. Deviations from the mission have to be reported as soon as possible, the acting commander will be held responsible accordingly.

While conducting an assessment of the situation during an operation commanders have to determine whether a fundamental change in the situation has occurred—in other words, would the commander had given the same mission had he known how the situation would develop?

This form of initiative is bound to both the fundamental change in the situation and the inability to communicate with the higher commander based on either a time critical reaction or the loss of communication. Nevertheless, it remains constrained by the higher commander's intent. While the U.S. Army acknowledges that commanders deviate from orders when those orders no longer fit the situation, a concept similar to the German fundamental change in situation, the search for and action upon exceptional information is no longer defined in ADRP 6-0.²³

The third form of initiative is based on a deeper insight into and understanding of the respective unit's situation. As we will see in the historical studies, this can consist of an extraordinary opportunity outside the boldest imagination of the superior when he was formulating his intent. The other scenario is when a military action will only result in additional losses, which are out of proportion to the contribution to the success of the higher commander's operation or which result in the breakdown of a unit's ability to fight as an organized body.

This latter possibility is not codified in doctrine but represents a logical extension of the concept of fundamental change in situation, as described above. As such it is bound to the professional understanding of an unfolding battle and the chances, risks and limitations resulting from deviating from the higher commander's intent. As with the second form of initiative, the situation has to require time-critical reaction and timely prior communication with the higher commander must be impossible. U.S. Army doctrine does not reflect this form of initiative, however, the application of mission command in the absence of a clear concept are sufficiently abstract to potentially allow for this third category of deviation from orders.

Table 1. Overview of the Three Forms of Initiative

Category	Degree of Freedom	Conditions
1	Within Unit's Mission	None
2	Within Higher Commander's Intent	Fundamental Change in Situation
3	Within Professional Assessment	Not Specified

Source: Created by author.

Additionally, no German Soldier has to follow orders that represent a misdemeanor; indeed, they are obligated to disobey orders resulting in a criminal offense.²⁴ As those are legal rules, acting under such legal circumstances is not considered as initiative based on the above stated definition, and therefore this subject area is not discussed in this thesis.

Phasing Model

This thesis covers close to 200 years of developments in the Prussian and German Armies. Changes in doctrine and understanding of *Auftragstaktik* in the four different armies of this time period did not always go hand in hand with the major political events; personalities and the conduct of warfare had more influence. This suggests using a phased model to identify major developments in the field of initiative.

This thesis therefore divides the changing doctrine and understanding of initiative into four partly overlapping phases:

1. The emergence of *Auftragstaktik*, from Clausewitz's understanding of war to the total initiative of field commanders in Moltke's age and World War I, 1806-1918;
2. Low tactical level initiative in the synchronized warfare of World War I, 1915-1918;
3. An army shaped for initiative versus detailed tactical control by Hitler, 1919-1945; and
4. The ethical component of initiative—responsibility for the preservation of units to *Innere Führung*, 1941-1955.

As described above, initiative is a means to counter surprise or the unexpected. While the first form of initiative is supposed to be the normal conduct of interaction between different levels within the army, the latter two forms for the sake of coordination are bound to specific exceptional circumstances. Doctrine is aimed at informing about the conduct of planning and operations in its prevailing forms and conditions. Countering exceptional and unexpected circumstances will therefore naturally not be described to a

full extent. Hence solely analyzing doctrine does not suffice for the aim of this thesis.

The analysis of the different phases will therefore also be based upon the manner of execution of operations, doctrinal documents and publications of influential leaders, as well as the external framework of the armed forces.

¹Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War, From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 116-117.

²MacGregor Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution: The French Revolution and After," in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050*, ed. MacGregor Knox and Murray Williamson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 58-66.

³*Ibid.*, 60. The size of the armies Frederick the Great commanded for a single battle did not extend the approximately 60.000 men of the battle of Hohenfriedeberg in 1745. The average number of forces was between 20.000 (Mollwitz and Rossbach) and 37.000 (Zorndorf). See Citino, *The German Way of War*, 37-91.

⁴Peter Paret, "Napoleon and the Revolution in War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 125.

⁵Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution," 69.

⁶*Ibid.*, 72.

⁷From the German perspective, the armed forces in the different epochs and with the different political systems are seen as distinct. Therefore the term German armies between 1806 and 1955 incorporates the (imperial) German Army, the *Reichswehr*, the Army within the *Wehrmacht*, and (post World War II) the Heer within the *Bundeswehr*. The National People's Army of eastern Germany was founded in 1956 and is not part of the analysis within this thesis.

⁸Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906 Kriegsgeschichtlich Erläutert* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1906), 6.

⁹U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, September 2012).

¹⁰The detailed discussion of the development of early warfare from group hunting methods and its tools to ancient armies with designated technology is far beyond the

possibilities of this work. For a comprehensive portrait of the use of horses as an example for the technological struggle for advantages in warfare, back to 3200-3100 BC, see Louis A. DiMarco, *War Horse, A History of the Military Horse and Rider* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2008).

¹¹Geoffrey Parker, ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History, Warfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-6.

¹²Meir Finkel, *On Flexibility, Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 2.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 2-4.

¹⁵Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 117, 119-120.

¹⁶Finkel, *On Flexibility*, 99.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁸U.S. Army ADRP 1-02 C2 defines operational initiative as “[t]he setting or dictating the terms of action throughout an operation.”

¹⁹U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, C2 (Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, November 2012): 1-20.

²⁰U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, 2-4.

²¹For a comprehensive analysis of the concept of *Auftragstaktik* see Jochen Wittmann, *Auftragstaktik—Just a Command Technique or the Core Pillar of Mastering the Military Operational Art?* (Berlin, Germany: Carola Hartmann Miles-Verlag, 2012). Wittman in chapter 2.3.2 also describes three different “cases” describing the leeway of subordinate commanders, his model however lacks precision and detail, the reference to assigned and implied tasks does not reflect the concept of *Auftragstaktik* which is focused on the higher commander’s intent, the mission and the essential contribution or mission essential task to the higher commander’s concept of operations.

²²U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, 2-22.

²³While U.S. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0 in no. 2-19 only states that “Commanders deviate from orders only when they are unlawful, risk the lives of Soldiers, or when orders no longer fit the situation”, the term exceptional information is not used. The concept of exceptional information as defined in

FM 6-0 requires the staff and subordinate commanders to search for exceptional information, “information that would have answered one of the commander’s critical information requirements if the requirement for it had been foreseen and stated as a commander’s critical information requirement.” U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, September 2011), A-29. This concept aims at countering the same occasions as the fundamental change in situation concept; however, it is in U.S. doctrine not linked to initiative.

²⁴Soldatengesetz in der Fassung der Bekanntmachung vom 30. Mai 2005 (BGBl. I S. 1482), das durch Artikel 6 des Gesetzes vom 11. Juni 2013 (BGBl. I S. 1514) geändert worden ist: § 11.

CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE OF AUFTRAGSTAKTIK, FROM CLAUSEWITZ'S
UNDERSTANDING OF WAR TO THE TOTAL INITIATIVE OF
FIELD COMMANDERS IN MOLTKE'S
AGE AND WORLD WAR I

In general, one does well to order no more than is absolutely necessary and to avoid planning beyond the situations one can foresee. These change very rapidly in war. Seldom will orders that anticipate far in advance and in detail succeed completely to execution. . . .

The higher the authority, the shorter and more general will the orders be. The next lower command adds what further precision appears necessary. The detail of execution is left to the verbal order, to the command. Each thereby retains freedom of action and decision within his authority.¹

— Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*

Moltke's age, the phase in the development of initiative in the Prussian and later German Army was characterized by a command culture which is perfectly described by the extract of the Prussian General Staff's 1869 *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders* shown above.

The point of view the paper takes here is from the end of a process rather than analyzing the process itself. The defeat at Jena and Auerstedt, which is described at the head of this paper,² created the precondition for a change process in the Prussian Army. The growth of armies to unprecedented sizes created the need for separated movement of large units and concentration for the decisive battle only; increasing firepower of both artillery and infantry required more and more dispersion of units in the battle. The change process in the Prussian Army included the creation of the General Staff, the introduction of higher education for officers, and changes in force structure, equipment, drafting

system and many other aspects.³ It was determined by the struggle between conservative and reactionary groups on one side and the reformers, most notably Gneisenau, Scharnhorst and Hermann von Boyen on the other.

In addition to the internal struggle in the armed forces, the state saw a conflict between King Friedrich Wilhelm IV and the democratic movement over constitutional rights and the form of government. The Prussian Army, subject to suspicion from the democratic side from its beginnings, became a focus of the dispute during and after the 1848 revolt, when its role as an instrument for the preservation of royal power became evident. This affected the ability of the Prussian Army to professionalize, until the German-Danish War of 1864 led to the reconsideration of its role as an instrument of foreign policy and a calming down of the quarrel with the parliament, an effect chancellor Otto von Bismarck had hoped for.⁴ These epic conflicts make it seem natural, that the doctrinal development of the Army was nothing more than a sideshow of the events.

Initially it was not Clausewitz, who held a purely administrative position at the *Kriegsakademie*, but Scharnhorst and Gneisenau who shaped the instrument of the General Staff and developed the “technique of command, characterized by clear and comprehensive formulation of objective but always leaving room for individual initiative and freedom of action.”⁵ Helmut von Moltke himself was a product of the change processes that shaped the command culture of the Army he took over in 1857. Commissioned into the Prussian Army in 1822, he attended the *Kriegsakademie* and served, typically for a General Staff Officer, in a broad variety of positions, including military advisor in the Ottoman Empire and high level positions at the royal court.⁶

His writings, most notably the 1869 *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders* and the 1888 *Exerzir-Reglement* (drill regulation), which covered units up to the brigade, codified the Clausewitzian school of thought and influenced the Prusso-German doctrine well beyond World War I. Hence they constitute the result of the change process started with the reforms after 1806 and establish the doctrinal concept of *Auftragstaktik*.

Doctrine Discussion

The results of the military revolution of the Napoleonic Wars changed the character of warfare and resulted in a larger geographical dispersion of the forces, which created a much larger leeway for subordinate commanders to fill. The reform process of the Prussian Army was shaped by Scharnhorst and later Gneisenau. Clausewitz's book *On War* formulated and preserved the underlying ideas and hence influenced the generation of officers who commanded in the wars from 1866 and 1870 onwards.⁷ In addition to the operational level need to move separately and concentrate at the decisive point, the increased firepower of both infantry and artillery required the breakup of the *Normaltaktik*, the classic linear form of employment of forces in closed formations. The process of doctrinal adaption for the tactical level however went everything else than smooth and consistent. The Chief of the Historical Department of the Great General Staff, Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann von Freytag-Loringhoven in 1906 complains about parade-addiction and retro-tactic developments during the long peacetime of the first half of the nineteenth century and even after the Prusso-Austrian and Franco-German wars.⁸

Clausewitz's book *On War* depicts the theoretical background to the Prussian understanding of warfare that started and shaped the process of doctrinal development. Its basic concepts, including the development of a battle in the struggle of will, friction, and

insufficient knowledge about the situation and the resulting chaotic nature of the battlefield laid the seed for the idea creation of an army in which resembles more a swarm of fish than a well planned and designed machinery.

Tactical Level Doctrine

The developments shown above are reflected in the structure and content of doctrine: The 1812 *Exerzir-Regelment*—drill regulations—for the infantry, the capstone doctrine document developed largely by General Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg, was still confined to employment exercises, drill style, from single soldier to brigade level.⁹ It did not differentiate between parade and battle drill but introduced novelties such as skirmishers, infantry columns and stressed combined arms with cavalry and artillery in a supporting role for the infantry.¹⁰ Its chapter about skirmish tactics included the initial references about the need for low level initiative and actions upon one's own judgment of the situation.¹¹ The manual states: "The soldier is in most cases on his own, no mechanistic formation guides his movement. An outstanding marksmanship, physical agility, judgment, ruse, boldness at the right place, and self-confidence have to be his qualities."¹²

The 1847 regulations, at close to double the number of pages, represented a regression compared to its predecessor, confining the employment of forces to more detailed and mechanistic forms.¹³ The chapter about skirmish tactics remained unchanged until 1867.¹⁴ The 1847 drill regulations were reprinted in 1876; the changes, based on the experiences of the Franco-Prussian War included the reinforcement of flexibility in maneuvers based on the increased firepower of both artillery and infantry.¹⁵ As a result of the more decentralized order of battle, the independence of officers, non-commissioned

officers, and soldiers in skirmish lines is stressed.¹⁶ “All leaders of skirmishers have to permanently observe the enemy and the terrain features, they have to assess, in which kind the skirmish line or a part of it can best advance towards the enemy, if and how an encirclement or a flanking attack can be executed, a weakness of the enemy can be exploited”¹⁷ For the tactical levels, the need to supplement the command word by an order was accepted, to allow for clarity about the purpose of a tactical action.¹⁸

The 1888 drill regulations distinguished between battle drill and parade drill, additionally covering in its part two—the battle—fundamental realities of warfare and leadership in combat. They reflected Clausewitzian thinking as well as Moltke’s instructions for large unit commanders, as quoted at the beginning of this chapter and extended these instructions to leaders at the lowest level, stating that autonomy is the fundament of success in warfare.¹⁹ Drill is to provide discipline, morale and the basic skills necessary for the employment of units according to the situation and necessities of the battle. Instead of being an end in itself as in prior doctrine, it becomes a mean for realistic—*kriegsgemäße*—exercises.²⁰ Junior leaders are supposed to be in the position and willing to exercise initiative to exploit opportunities, non-commissioned officers bear the responsibility for the employment of the soldiers of their squad.²¹ Battalion, regimental, and brigade commanders assign missions to their subordinates, leave the method of accomplishment to them and foster their understanding of the cohesive concept of the battle plan.²² The manual describes for the early the fundamentals of mission type orders stating:

[The battalion commander] executes the battle through missions he assigns to his companies. Only on the occasion of obvious misunderstandings or mistakes that could draw the battle into an unintended direction, the direct

override in the platoons of single companies is due. . . . His actions have to be aimed at retaining the common scheme of the companies. The companies for their part aim upon accomplishment of their missions also at the common scheme.²³

The level of appreciation of independent military leaders is in addition depicted by the foreword, written by Wilhelm II King of Prussia. It states the need not to restrict the leeway deliberately provided by the regulations, threatening offenders with enforced retirement. More specifically the need for independently acting officers is underlined by the fact that a break of the rules of the regulation's drill and parade elements is to be punished, whereas in contrast the "mistaken understanding of part two is to be corrected in an educating manner."²⁴ The 1888 regulations formally establish the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* as a general rule for command and control at the tactical level.

The 1906 drill regulations continued the trend towards individualization of the soldier on the battlefield and independent action of smaller units. The company becomes the largest element for employment drill.²⁵ In addition to the autonomy of soldiers and leaders at all levels praised in the earlier doctrine, non-commissioned officers are supposed to assume the role of their superior officers if the situation demands.²⁶ *Auftragstaktik* in a form comparable to that presented in chapter one of this thesis is defined:

Orders (*Anordnungen*) given from rearward commands will easily be made obsolete by the events. **Timely action** is often only possible upon **independent decision**. The lower command units though have to observe that they are destined to solve the tactical problem (*Gefechtsaufgabe*) **as intended by the higher commander** [original emphasis].²⁷

This sets the tone for the second category of initiative, as presented in chapter one, the high demands put upon leaders further qualify the requirements for deviations from orders.

The foremost quality of a leader remains the **willingness to take responsibility** (*Verantwortungsfreudigkeit*). It would be understood falsely, if one aimed at making arbitrary decisions with disregard of the whole or not precisely following given orders and let know-all manner take the place of obedience.

But in the cases in which the subordinate has to say to himself that the ordering person could not sufficiently oversee the circumstances or where the order has been rendered obsolete by the events, it becomes an obligation of the subordinate not to obey or to alter the execution of orders received and report this to the superior. The full responsibility for not obeying the order remains with him.

All leaders have to constantly stay aware and inculcate in their subordinates that **forbearance and dereliction weigh heavier than mistaking in the selection of an action** [original emphasis].²⁸

The independence of subordinate leaders however is to be more limited; their risk of getting into arbitrariness is pointed out, while their autonomy on the other hand is seen as a prerequisite for success in battle.²⁹ Comparable to the Prussian 1888 drill regulation, the 1906 version for the Bavarian Army signed by the Prince Regent Luitpold of Bavaria contains a foreword that stresses the need for realistic battle drill and leeway in the conduct of this training.³⁰ In his military historical illustrations of the 1906 regulations, the Chief of the Historic Section of the Prussian General Staff, Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann von Freytag-Loringhoven focused mainly on the employment of forces under the circumstances of the technological developments of the late nineteenth century weapons and the new battle tactics. *Auftragstaktik* is described in a way of an established philosophy. The need for proper orders, which reflect the intent and coordinate the movements of cooperating units, is underlined as well as the need for precise reporting and proper communications.³¹ The necessity of a balance between independently acting leaders and a cohesive and coordinated conduct of operations is mentioned, however it was obviously not considered important enough to clarify it with historic examples.³²

Auftragstaktik as a whole seemed to be less important to illustrate than the new tactics countering the technological developments.

Operational Level Doctrine

The first doctrine for operational level was created by the 1869 *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*. They cover the echelons from division up to the army.³³

Drafted by junior General Staff officers, the writing process was closely monitored and the draft was in parts intensively edited by Moltke before it was submitted to the king.³⁴

Examples of intensive editing are Chapter I—General Remarks—and Chapter VI—Command and Control, which points out the necessity that higher commanders concentrate on their function and do not interfere with their subordinate’s responsibilities by ordering details, as shown in the quote at the beginning of this chapter.³⁵ While this aims at creating command flexibility, chapter one stresses Clausewitz’s friction when it states that officers will often face situations where, in the absence of orders, they have to act upon their own understanding of their superior’s intent, hence using cognitive flexibility.³⁶

Overall, the doctrine written and influenced by Moltke sets the tone for the Prusso-German command philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*. It coined the understanding of warfare as expressed by Clausewitz’s *On War* and countered the challenges caused by the vastly growing geographic extension of the armies and the need to disperse the forces to avoid casualties based on the increased firepower of advanced weapons. His “Instructions for Large Unit Commanders” and the 1888 drill regulations formally expressed the mature understanding that both senior and junior officers have to act within the higher commander’s intent upon their judgment. Two different developments can be seen; firstly

the recognition of the need of independently operating leaders at the operational level to cope with the increased size of the army and the geographical expansion of the battlefield. Secondly was the development from the need to have autonomously acting soldiers in skirmish lines to independence of leaders at all levels to allow for initiative of increasingly dispersed formations.

Execution of Initiative

Prussians and Germans participated in several conflicts between 1806 and the First World War. The larger ones were the defeats of Napoleon following the battles of Leipzig in 1813 and Waterloo in 1815, the Austro-Prussian War in 1866, the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871 and the First World War.³⁷ The two campaigns against Napoleon were fought as part of a larger multinational coalition and took place at a time when the Prussian reforms were only partly in effect. Therefore this section will analyze only the Danish War, the Austro-Prussian War, the Franco-Prussian War and those parts of World War I, which included and maintained the capability for operational maneuver. In a first step, historic case studies selected as exemplary by the Prussian General Staff for publication in Volume 4 of Moltke's *Militärische Werke* will be reviewed.³⁸ After analyzing this official picture of *Auftragstaktik* a subsequent inquiry will look other facets of the execution of initiative, which are not part of the official picture.

The Official Picture of *Auftragstaktik*

As a historical example to illustrate the findings of Moltke's essay *Zusammensetzung der Hauptquartiere-Wahl des Feldherrn-Freiheit des Handelns* (composition of headquarters, selection of the commander, freedom of action) the

decisions of General Steinmetz, Commander First Army during the border battles of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 were described.³⁹ With the given mission to envelop and strike in the flank and rear of French forces fixed by Second Army he was tasked on August 3, 1870 to cross the Saar River and concentrate at the right of Second Army. He was directed as follows:

Dilatory advance of the French justifies assumption that the Second Army can be concentrated on the 6th instant in front of the forest zone at Kaiserslautern. If rapid advance of enemy cannot be prevented, concentration of Second Army to take place behind the Lauter. Combined action of both armies in the battle intended; First Army from St. Wendel and Baumholder. His Majesty orders that First Army concentrates on the 4th against Tholey. Tomorrow Third Army crosses frontier at Weissenburg. General offensive intended.⁴⁰

Instead of conducting this enveloping movement, Steinmetz moved in on the French at Spicheren on the direct line, thus blocking the advance routes reserved for the Second Army and separating its main body from the advance elements.⁴¹ Although this caused a logistical nightmare and ruined the plans for a *Kesselschlacht* closely behind the French border, the analysis of the historical case study takes extensive efforts to explain that the royal command's (hence Moltke's) change from general directives to direct orders was required by the necessity of the combined advance of the armies that could only be coordinated by the king. The latter case study points out that the direct orders were only justified by the need to coordinate the movements but that the freedom of execution of the orders by the army commanders were not to be limited.⁴² No judgment about the often-criticized Steinmetz can be found although the various occasions of explaining the concept of operations are stressed.⁴³ Over the following days Moltke made intensive efforts to ensure that the directions and roads assigned to the different armies would be ordered and changed only by the royal command.⁴⁴ The tendency to use whichever

unoccupied road in sight, disregarding the traffic control measures in the process, seems to have been a symptomatic behavior of commanders at all levels.

Describing the events accompanying the battle Columbey-Nouilly on the 14th of August, the case study explains again the need to coordinate the operations of the First and Second Army. General Steinmetz's now much more passive and defensive conduct of operations is described in a very balanced way. Steinmetz's attempt to preserve his independence by hiding the position of his headquarters is the only point of obvious criticism.⁴⁵ The intensive interaction between Second Army and the royal headquarters during and following the battle of Mars-la-Tour and Vionville in contrast is depicted as exemplary.⁴⁶ It included direct tactical control—"[b]ecause of the gravity of the situation had become clear, his majesty the king decided to proceed to the battlefield with his entire staff early on August 17"⁴⁷—of the different corps engaged in the battle.⁴⁸ For the following pursuit the case study states: "All German armies received only general directives. The broad freedom of action, which previously could be granted only to the Third Army and which had to be more or less curtailed in the cases of the First and Second armies after August 11, was restored."⁴⁹

The following pursuit of the French towards Sedan and the following months are described more superficially as interplay between independent operations and "[d]irect orders from the royal headquarters [that] restricted the freedom of decision of the commanders only when the king's views were not carried out, or when reports of enemy activities made direct intervention unavoidable."⁵⁰ There seem to have been no further friction between the royal headquarters and the subordinate commanders worth mentioning to explain nature of the command relationship.

To illustrate Moltke's essay on battle—*Die Schlacht*— several historic examples have been drawn to exemplify his findings about the independence of leaders. The first case study briefly describes the advance of the Prussian I Corps under Prince Friedrich Karl during the 1864 campaign against Denmark. The corps on the 2nd of February had the mission to secure the eight-kilometer wide chokepoint between the Eckernförde inlet and the Schlei River in the disputed duchy of Schleswig.⁵¹ The advance was part of a flanking or enveloping movement against the Danish forces defending the main fortifications between the Schlei River and the North Sea. The crossing of the river was planned to take place at the fortified town of Missunde, or further east at the village of Arnis.⁵² The corps had already reached the chokepoint by nine o'clock in the morning and Prince Friedrich Karl decided to further advance towards the planned river crossing at Missunde to avoid having to secure the chokepoint into two directions and based on the assumption that the Danish forces might withdraw when confronted with an energetic surprise thrust.⁵³ This would have allowed for an envelopment of the forces defending further west. The published analysis reads as follows: "[T]he undertaking against Missunde on that day failed; the crossing at Arnis was not accomplished until February 6. Nevertheless, the decision arrived at independently demonstrates a correct appreciation of conditions and the enterprising spirit of the commanding general."⁵⁴ The extent of appreciation in this assessment (as of all historic case studies published by the General Staff) can only be identified with deep knowledge about the circumstances and discussions of the General Staff in those days. The example above does not only show the appreciation for initiative of a corps commander engaging his next day's objective prematurely which resulted in a minor defeat and less than 200 casualties. In fact, Moltke

himself had written essays in December 1862, December 1863 and January 1864 which concluded that the river crossing at Missunde would be very difficult or, as he later stated, impossible.⁵⁵ Appreciating the initiative and independent action within the higher commander's intent but against Moltke's professional opinion increases the weight of this assessment and demonstrates the value the General Staff saw in it.

The second case study attached to the battle-essay is the account of the unfolding battle of Königgrätz. On the evening of the 2nd of July 1866 patrols of the Prussian First Army had identified the positions of what they thought was a major portion of the Austrian Army at Königgrätz and the neighboring heights. The commander of First Army decided to maneuver his divisions into attack positions early next morning, informed Second Army about the situation and his plan and asked for support by available units. The messenger to Second Army was dispatched at 9:30pm and shortly afterwards the commander's aide-de-camp was sent to the royal headquarters where the king and Moltke were woken up with that news. Moltke assessed that they had the whole Austrian Army in front of them and that First Army, attacking alone would not be successful. It was decided that First Army was to frontally fix the Austrians and that Second Army would attack the enemy's right flank.⁵⁶ The king's aide-de-camp left the royal headquarters for First Army conveying that decision to its I Corps while passing its command post on the way.⁵⁷ He reached First Army headquarters at four o'clock in the morning.⁵⁸ Although the letter informing I Corps had encompassed the permission to assemble the forces and individually advance before arrival of orders by his direct superior, I Corps' commanding general, von Bonin, decided to wait for these orders. After the orders were received between 7:15 and 7:45am, the vanguard did not begin moving until 9:30am.⁵⁹ In contrast

to this hesitant behavior the commander of 1st Guards Division, General Constantin von Alvensleben (who happens to be an ancestor of the author) was described as exercising initiative—marching to the sound of the guns without waiting for orders.⁶⁰ He is described as a role model, as well as identical actions of the division commanders belonging to the VI Corps.⁶¹ The resulting difference is obvious, while von Alvensleben was able to bring relief during the first crisis of the battle, when around noon the Prussian units fighting in the Swiepwald forest were on the verge of defeat, I Corps' vanguard arrived no earlier than 4:30p.m. just in time to contain the frantic attack of the Austrian reserve corps which kept the withdrawal road to Königgrätz open.⁶² To the reader knowledgeable of these events, of the more than three-hour delay caused by the hesitancy of von Bonin depicts the benefits of fundamental rule to march to the sounds of the guns. Von Alvensleben's conduct was effectively turned into state-approved command doctrine when his initiative-based actions earned him Prussia's highest decoration for bravery and valor, the *Pour le Mérite*.

The third historical example covers the battles on the frontier at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War. The illustration concentrates on the decisions and operations of commanders at the corps and division level, leading towards the bloody battles and victories of Wörth and Spicheren. Two different principles of Prussian operational art are depicted as forming the motivation for the different commanders to exercise initiative while being exposed to an unclear enemy situation: The aim to get or stay in contact with the adversary and to concentrate forces for the battle—the marching to the sound of the guns.⁶³ The case study explains the reasons different commanders acted the way they did. It shows how opportunities were used, for example at the Saar River crossing, when an

attack on the hills at Spichern was necessary to extend that bridgehead to an appropriate depth.⁶⁴ The actions are contrasted to the negative example of the behavior of the enemy commanders, a contrast Citino describes as “French passivity and . . . inexorable Prussian flanking maneuvers, which simply stretched the French line until it broke.”⁶⁵ It is seemingly the stark contrast between the sometimes unimaginative approaches of the tactical level commanders, resulting in high casualties—at Spicheren for example the Prussians lost two men for every French casualty compared to a rate of four Austrian killed or wounded per Prussian casualty at Königgrätz—against Moltke’s praised operational level maneuvers which creates the background for the selection of this case study.⁶⁶ The case study also fails to mention Moltke’s own criticism about the battles stated shortly after the war in his *Overview about the Events from July 15th to August 17th 1870*.⁶⁷

This analysis of historical examples is far from complete in covering the publications written, selected or edited by Moltke or in his name by the military historical section of the General Staff. Still, one general line is obvious: Initiative based upon independent decisions of commanders was depicted as an important value in itself, even with disregard to the outcome of the action as we have seen with the examples of Steinmetz and Prince Friedrich Karl. The aim of the discussed historical examples illustrating Moltke’s essays was to foster initiative within the ranks, without fear of judgments made in hindsight.

The final piece of official history to be analyzed in this context is the historic explanation of the 1906 drill manual by the Chief of the Historical Section of the General Staff, Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann von Freytag-Loringhoven. It provides historical

examples for the different topics of part two of the manual, the battle.⁶⁸ *Auftragstaktik* and initiative are not covered with distinct case studies, but they can be found described as side aspects of two historical examples. The author claims that the execution of initiative has to be based on thorough assessment of the situation, which can only be achieved by officers whose understanding of combined warfare and operational concept of larger units is created early in his career.⁶⁹ To avoid arbitrary actions and initiative “beyond the right limits”⁷⁰ the aim of the case studies is to illustrate these two prerequisites.⁷¹ The first case study (depicting initiative) cites the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 to discuss the dispersed formations and the effects on command and control, firepower and protection against enemy fire. It describes the need for independent actions of lower echelon leaders and individual soldiers but points out that the will to stay linked within the units and to the next higher echelon has to be engrained into soldiers and leaders at all levels.⁷² The second case study discusses the requirements for orders and the leeway of subordinates based on the example of the battle of St. Privat on the 18th of August, 1870. It is stated that the orders have to encompass adequate guidance, especially in terms of the intent or purpose of the operation, boundaries on the battlefield as well as communication and coordination.⁷³ Subordinates are “never to lose sight of the common concept of the battle (*gemeinsamen Gefechtszweck*).”⁷⁴ Without being specific about individual commander’s decisions during the battle the case study is most likely referring to General Steinmetz’s premature frontal attack east of Gravelotte which resulted in the unnecessary slaughter of the Prussian First Army before the decisive flanking attack of the Guard Corps and the Saxon Corps had even started.

Overall the 1906 analysis is much more aware of the risks and limitations coming with independent actions of commanders at the different levels. While the need for dispersed formations is stressed especially against the background of the firepower that had further increased at the beginning of the twentieth century the author stresses the need to keep up communications between the echelons. Initiative is no longer depicted as a value in itself, so that its extent has to be shaped to the necessities and possibilities of the specific situation on the battlefield.

Additional Facets of the Execution of Initiative

Two additional facets of initiative have to be reviewed to complement the execution of initiative: The independent actions of soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and junior officers at the lowest tactical levels and the developments at the Western Front leading the race to the sea and the loss of operational level maneuver.

It is interesting that in contrast to the fact that the different doctrinal sources stressed the need for independent actions at the lowest level as early as 1812 there were no historical examples chosen to illustrate how this initiative should look like. On a regular basis sources covering the above mentioned wars deliver accounts that battalions or regiments lost most or all of their officers during the battle. The increased precision of infantry weapons allowed for deliberate targeting of leaders as this sarcastic quotation of a Prussian soldier at Königgrätz depicts: “Na, we’ll come out of this in fine shape. The dogs are aiming only at our first lieutenants.”⁷⁵ Reports that those high losses led to a breakdown of units are rare. Moltke describes that during the battle of Spicheren infantry brigades with losses of more than 20 percent and a single battalion with 33 percent casualties were still capable of attacking. Over all branches out of the 6909 casualties in

that battle 234 were officers.⁷⁶ Considering the fact that those casualties massed in the infantry and company grade officers were most likely overrepresented, the overall officer loss rate of 3.4 percent of the total losses while representing less than 3 percent of the personnel at the company level very likely meant the near extinction of the junior officers in the front line battalions. Hence it seems to be safe to state that the efforts to engrain a spirit of taking the initiative in the absence of orders and train the soldiers in a realistic way had been successful.

This success may be a reason for not considering it necessary to depict specific examples. In addition, while officers were supposed to be educated, non-commissioned officers and soldiers had only basic education and while being able to read and write were probably not too keen reading professional texts. Initiative at the lowest tactical level was still limited in scope: A company with one platoon in the skirmish line was approximately 150 steps wide and deep.⁷⁷ Initiative would consist of soldiers utilizing the terrain in their direct proximity, firing at their own rhythm, keeping eye contact with the leaders, moving in the assigned direction in line with the unit and continuing the assault or defense when the leaders were killed. Hence there was not too much to write about. In addition, acting independently per se is threatening the cohesion and discipline of an army. Provided in a proper dose during training it was a successful technique but written examples might have had the inherent risk that the devotion and discipline necessary to move over open terrain towards the enemy lines while sustaining heavy casualties would have been lost.

When World War I started, the German Army went to war with the mindset about initiative described in this chapter. It was combat-proven in the wars of 1864, 1866, 1870,

and more recently by the Japanese Army in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905.⁷⁸ The defense of East Prussia contained all the elements of initiative described in the historical examples from the Franco-Prussian War: The campaign plan foresaw luring the Russians, separated by a group of large lakes and the layout of their railway net, half way into East Prussia and then defeating each of the two Russian armies individually. The commander of I Corps, General Hermann von François, disregarded his superior's orders and decided instead to engage the Russian First Army, attacking north of the Masurian Lakes, directly at the border. He did not inform his superior army headquarters and fought a successful battle that only became known to the higher army, when the corps artillery requested ammunition resupply.⁷⁹ No consequences followed. Three days later the first major battle was fought at Gumbinnen, when in accordance with the campaign plan the Russian army attacking in the north was beaten back and its defeat became possible for the next day.⁸⁰ The Eighth Army Commander, General Maximilian von Prittwitz, however, upon the information that the Second Russian Army had crossed the border, lost his nerve and informed the Army High Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*) in Koblenz that he had decided to break off the battle and had ordered a general withdrawal behind the River Weichsel.⁸¹ This would have jeopardized not only the defense of East Prussia—with the united Russian armies being superior to the German forces available—but also the campaign plan for the Western Front because the deployment of additional forces for the defense of eastern Germany and ultimately Berlin would have been necessary. Von Prittwitz was relieved, together with the chief of staff; Paul von Benneckendorff und von Hindenburg and his chief of staff Erich Ludendorff took over.

The general withdrawal was not executed, instead all forces except a cavalry division were thrown at the Second Russian Army in the south of the Masurian Lakes. While the envelopment was developing and an initial attack into the Russian left flank was to take place, the I Corps' commander, von François, decided upon his own judgment to delay the attack. He had to be urged twice to attack by Eighth Army chief of staff von Ludendorff.⁸² What followed was a role model of operational art, the successful envelopment against an unaware enemy, disrupting the Second Russian Army. Subsequently the Russian First Army in the north was driven from East-Prussian soil although the attempt to decisively defeat it failed. The scheme of independent operations continued on the eastern front for the remainder of the war, the sheer width of the terrain and the relatively smaller number of forces allowing for operational level maneuver from both sides.

On the Western Front, commanders of the seven German armies concentrated from north to south along the border enjoyed the same leeway as their counterpart in East Prussia. They were to follow a modified version of the so-called Schlieffen Plan—the basic idea, that the right wing (First, Second and Third Army) would wheel into the French Army's left flank and push it against Alsace, Lorraine and the Swiss border.⁸³ The difference between the east and the west was that the multi-army operation in the west needed synchronization whereas Eighth Army in East Prussia operated independently. Ignoring this need and the restrictions to independent actions of subordinated commanders his uncle had imposed during the Franco-Prussian War,⁸⁴ the Chief of Staff of the High Command, Helmut Johannes Ludwig von Moltke (the younger), kept the headquarters initially in Berlin and moved it then to Koblenz and later Luxemburg—the

subsequent positions still being too far behind the main thrust at the right to allow for effective command and control. This way he also sought to prevent the emperor from intervening in the daily operations. He left the coordination of the advance of First, Second and Third Army to the army commanders with at first informal and later formal authority to be in the hands of Second Army's commander, General Karl von Bülow.⁸⁵ This odd command structure led to repeated occasions in which the three armies would request mutual support or flank protection, occasions when the individual commanders had to weigh the needs for a combined approach and their individual advance on the battlefield while in general not having the required information to make a professional assessment.⁸⁶ It prevented a decisive battle against the shattered French Fifth Army because of von Bülow's inability to coordinate a combined approach of the three German armies.⁸⁷ On the 27th of August, Moltke reestablished the independence of First Army, which as a result of the losses and the distance of 140 kilometers to its railhead was so exhausted that the plan to bypass the fortress of Paris in the west was no longer realistic.⁸⁸ The increased activity of the French and the British Expeditionary Force would have required a close coordination of the advancing armies in this decisive phase. But the High Command in Luxemburg had received no reports from First or Second Army during 1st and 2nd of September. On the evening of the 2nd Moltke decided, based on suspicions, to change the concept of operations and have Second Army envelop the French between Verdun and Paris with First Army following as a flank protection. In the meanwhile the commander of First Army, General Alexander Heinrich von Kluck had—on his own—decided to change the direction of advance and conduct a flanking attack on the French Fifth Army.⁸⁹ He informed the Army High Command and his neighboring

armies on the 4th of September and demanded to be kept informed about their operations.⁹⁰ This change in direction of First Army blocked Second Army's advance and opened the whole German advance to a flanking attack from the Paris area. Seeing that risk, Moltke issued an order to halt the First and Second Army and secure the right flank, Third Army was to move up to close a gap in the vicinity of Reims. While this order was issued, Third Army's commander had decided for a day of rest on the 5th of September, a decision he stood by even when he received Moltke's order and was informed that Second Army, his left neighbor, was advancing and thereby increasing the gap between the armies to 30 kilometers.⁹¹ It was already too late when, on the 5th of September, the first visit of Moltke's emissary Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch at First Army's headquarters for the first time brought the information of the general situation together with the knowledge and plans of the commander on the ground. The French attack from Paris had already hit First Army's IV Reserve Corps protecting the right flank.⁹² Still the lack of ability and will to communicate prevented a coordinated reaction of First and Second Army, to say nothing of the Army High Command.⁹³ The outcome is well known: The French and British forces were able to penetrate the gaps between the armies and threaten their flanks. On the 9th of September, LTC Hentsch's second visit led to the decision to break off the battle and withdraw the German forces. The Schlieffen Plan had failed and static trench warfare without large unit commander's initiative became the predominant way of fighting.

It is outside of the scope and possibilities of this work to discuss the details and reasons for the developments, which led to the failure of the German offensive. What can be seen is that the spirit of independent operations by large unit commanders still

prevailed at the beginning of World War I. The specific conditions at the eastern front where the replacement of Prittwitz with the strong command team of von Hindenburg and Ludendorff prevented a catastrophe and helped overcome the difficulties with the very independent von François. In the west, where the need for coordination was much higher, the problems arising from overly independent commanders were obvious with Moltke not able to resolve them as his uncle had done in 1870.

Conclusion

This chapter depicts the emergence of *Auftragstaktik*. Two different factors influenced its development at the tactical and operational levels. At the tactical level, the increasing accuracy and firepower of infantry weapons and artillery required the subsequently increased dispersal of assault formations from the linear tactics to open lines. This came at the price of reduced command and control abilities of leaders at the lower tactical echelons. Hence the autonomous conduct of battle and the will to act upon one's own judgment within the purpose of the operation and the higher commander's intent had to be established. The doctrinal development depicts how initially the first category of initiative, the autonomy to decide how a mission is fulfilled was established by 1876. The second category of initiative, the independent decision and action within the higher commander's intent, can be found as early as 1888.

The growth of the armies and the increased geographical extension of the battlefield was already established in Napoleon's Army and required that commanders at the operational level maneuver independently and move to the sound of the guns for the concentration of the armies. The Prussian Army only belatedly introduced this principle with the development of the General Staff officer system and the 1869 instructions for

large unit commanders. Huge efforts were made to depict and explain the value of higher commander's initiative and actions upon their professional judgment. This led, at least in part, to overly independent commanders who were unwilling to accept supporting roles in the battle and unlikely to accept interference into their operations by their own higher commands. The independence of those commanders was outside of the initiative model introduced in chapter one of this thesis. During the wars of the second half of the nineteenth century, fought without contiguous frontlines and the resulting threats to the flanks, the negative effects of such arbitrariness were less visible; as long as neighboring units would march towards the sound of the cannons, battle success was still possible. Moltke the elder's strong leadership counterbalanced negative effects. The 1906 manual and the historical examples illustrating it had to stress the importance of keeping the concept of operations in sight. Its text expresses all three categories of initiative.⁹⁴ The independent commanders mentioned above would argue that all their decisions were based upon their professional assessments. The extent to which they, based upon incomplete information, created their own reality to justify decisions that could also have been made out of ambition or for other reasons has to remain open.

¹Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Zweiter Theil, Die Tätigkeit als Chef des Generalstabs im Frieden*, ed. Preußischer Generalstab Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1900), 178. Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke, On the Art of War, Selected Writings*, trans. Daniel J Hughes and Harry Bell (New York: Random House, 1993), 184-185.

²See page 1.

³For a detailed description of the change process see Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), Chapter 2-4.

⁴Ibid., 169-170.

⁵Ibid., 63. Clausewitz himself became a victim of the struggle between conservative and reform forces in Prussia. Having for what seemed to him patriotic reason served in the Russian Army against Napoleon in 1812 he was seen as politically unreliable by King Friedrich Wilhelm III. His position as administrative director of the Kriegsakademie is often misunderstood as him influencing the officer education in the Prussian Army. His work *On War*, which he started writing in this time and which was published in 1832 after being edited by his wife, became famous when Moltke named it as an important source for his successes in the wars. See Werner Hahlweg, ed. *Vom Kriege, Hinterlassenes Werk des Generals Carl von Clausewitz* (Bonn, Germany: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlag, 1980), 29-34, 58.

⁶Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 2-3.

⁷Hahlweg, *Vom Kriege, Hinterlassenes Werk des Generals Carl von Clausewitz*, 58.

⁸Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 3.

⁹Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee* (Berlin: Georg Decker Königl. Geh. Oberhofbuchdrucker, 1812), v-xiv.

¹⁰Citino, *The German Way of War*, 130.

¹¹Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1812, 103-104.

¹²Ibid., 103.

¹³Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, rev. 25 May 1867 (Berlin: Decker Königl. Geh. Oberhofbuchdrucker, 1847), III-XII; Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 2-3.

¹⁴Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1847, 154-164, compared to Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1812, 103-115.

¹⁵The 1847 version of the regulations still enforced strict control about maneuvers with the exception of the skirmisher line; the changes until 1876 included columns down to the level of platoon split in half and sections to avoid the effects of enemy fire on

closed formations. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1847, 91-96.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 137-138, 146, 150, 152-153.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 193-194 see also Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 106-107.

¹⁹Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie* (signed 1888) (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1889), 109.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 89-91.

²¹*Ibid.*, 109-110.

²²*Ibid.*, 129-130, 141.

²³*Ibid.*, 129-130.

²⁴*Ibid.*, III.

²⁵Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie* (Munich, 1906), V-VI. In 1906 Bavaria as a few other German states had still retained a war ministry, the Prussian Ministry of War however was the one dominating the development of the armed forces in the German Empire seeking interoperability of the different state contingents. Both the Bavarian and the Prussian 1906 *Exerzier-Reglement* are similar; the Bavarian version is cited here for the lack of the first 16 pages in the Prussian document the author was able to review.

²⁶Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 130 Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, including changes until August 1906 (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1906), 78.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 126a.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 90-91.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 84.

³⁰Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie* (Munich, Germany, 1906), IV.

³¹Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 105-106, 40-41.

³²Ibid., 106, 256-257.

³³Moltke, *Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869*, 175-176.

³⁴Ibid., 167-169.

³⁵Ibid., 179-181.

³⁶Ibid., 174.

³⁷In addition to the above mentioned conflicts, Prussian troops were involved in the two wars fought over the control of the duchesses of Schleswig and Holstein against Denmark and troops of the German Empire were involved in colonial struggles, e.g. against the Boxer Movement in China.

³⁸Volume 4 of Moltke's *Militärische Werke* was assembled and published by the military history section of the General Staff. Although there is no proof of Moltke's personal involvement or his specific selection of historic case studies the work expresses the official history respectively the official thought of exemplary doctrinal behavior. Therefore they are specifically valuable for an analysis of the contemporary understanding of *Auftragstaktik*. For details see Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 15-17.

³⁹Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 76, 79-83.

⁴⁰Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Military Correspondence Pertaining of the War of 1870-71*, ed. Historical Section of the Prussian General Staff, Berlin 1896, translated by Harry Bell Ft Leavenworth, KS, CGSC Library, 1910. The order was transmitted from the Prussian Royal Headquarters to General Steinmetz's First Army on the 3rd of August 1870, 11:00am.

⁴¹Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 79-80; Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War, The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108.

⁴²An analysis of the orders issued during the early stages shows that the change from directives to orders tended to result in directly tasking the corps level. Occasionally the orders were in addition to informing the respective army headquarters directly sent to the corps itself. It remains unclear whether this meant a direct command and control relationship to the royal headquarters or was a result of the limitations of telegraph and messenger communications.

⁴³Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 79-80.

⁴⁴Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Correspondence*, No. 112, No. 125, No. 127.

⁴⁵Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 82-83. Steinmetz's actions are inconclusive, while requesting to advance closer to Metz he rejected to push his advance guards up front and when one of his divisions engaged the withdrawing French at Columbey he ordered them to break off combat. This inconclusiveness however may have been caused by very ambiguous orders by Moltke, which stated that a close coordination with Second Army was necessary, the concentration was not to be executed before the positions of the French were known and a passage of First Army north or south of Metz was to be expected. See Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Correspondence*, No. 137; Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 146-147.

⁴⁶Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 83-84.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁸Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Correspondence*, No. 177-180.

⁴⁹Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 84.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 87.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 133.

⁵²Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Kurze Übersicht des Feldzuges 1864 gegen Dänemark," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Band III, Kriegsgeschichtliche Arbeiten, Zweiter Theil*, edited by Preußischer Generalstab (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1899), 77-78.

⁵³Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵Moltke, *Kurze Übersicht des Feldzuges 1864*, 78.

⁵⁶Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz, Prussia's Victory over Austria 1866* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 84-86.

⁵⁷Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134.

⁵⁸Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 86.

⁵⁹Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134-135.

⁶⁰Thilo Krieg in his biography of General von Alvensleben shows that it was less the sound of the guns but more a request for support by 7th Division's commander, General Eduard von Fransecky that led to the decision to advance. Von Alvensleben did however not wait for an order by his division commander. It is remarkable that he did so, when he just had received an order from his division commander to take defensive positions without further advancing. Thilo Krieg, *Constantin von Alvensleben, General der Infanterie, Ein militärisches Lebensbild* (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1903), 62-64.

⁶¹Ibid., 135-136.

⁶²Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 109-110, 142, 149-151.

⁶³Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 117.

⁶⁴Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 140-142.

⁶⁵Citino, *The German Way of War*, 178.

⁶⁶Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 119.

⁶⁷Shortly after the war, Moltke wrote an initial illustration of the early border battles in the first weeks of the Franco-Prussian War. Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Kurze Darstellung der Ereignisse vom 15. Juli bis 17. August 1870," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Band III, Kriegsgeschichtliche Arbeiten, Zweiter Theil*, edited by Preußischer Generalstab (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1899), 157-173.

⁶⁸Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, VII-XII.

⁶⁹Ibid., 257.

⁷⁰Ibid., 106.

⁷¹Ibid., 257.

⁷²Ibid., 42-44.

⁷³Ibid., 105-106.

⁷⁴Ibid., 106.

⁷⁵Max Jähns, "Die Schlacht von Königgrätz," Leipzig, 1876, quoted in Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 110.

⁷⁶Moltke, *Kurze Darstellung der Ereignisse vom 15. Juli bis 17. August 1870*, 186.

⁷⁷The Prussian doctrine stated that the main body of a company or the support element of a skirmish line would march 150 steps behind the line. The width of a company depended on the number of platoons skirmishing. That would in general be one platoon of 25 soldiers at a distance of 5 to 6 steps each. See Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1847, 68-69.

⁷⁸Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 7-8.

⁷⁹John Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914* (London: Cassel & Co., 2002), 73-74. The plan to attack the deploying Russian forces as a shaping operation already close to the border to create a favorable force ratio had been intensively discussed. François was a proponent for this early attack although it has to remain open, whether his motivation was to prevent giving up East-Prussian territory and whether he had thought through the effects on the whole defense plan. See Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg, Clash of Empires* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), 155-156.

⁸⁰Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914*, 83.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 83-86.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 116.

⁸³Holger H. Herwig, *The Marne, 1914, The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2009), 40-44.

⁸⁴See pages 22-24.

⁸⁵Herwig, *The Marne, 1914*, 120-122.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 151, 161, 218.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 189-190.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 218-220.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 220-221. Although Kluck's decision is often criticized, one has to consider that this course of action had successfully been gamed in the case study Freytag II during the 1905 Staff Ride West. Kluck's chief of staff, then Major Kuhl, had participated in this staff ride, which was presided by Schlieffen himself. *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 222-223.

⁹¹Ibid., 235-237.

⁹²Ibid., 238-241.

⁹³Ibid., 246, 248-250, 254.

⁹⁴See page 9.

CHAPTER 3

LOW TACTICAL LEVEL INITIATIVE IN THE SYNCHRONIZED WARFARE OF WORLD WAR I

While I was expeditiously carrying out the preparations for the attack, ordering the machine-gun platoons into position, and organizing assault squads, the order came from the rear: “Württemberg Mountain Battalion withdraws.” . . . The battalion order to withdraw resulted in all units of the Rommel detachment marching back to Mount Cragonza, except for the hundred riflemen and six heavy machine-gun crews who remained with me. I debated breaking off the engagement and returning to Mount Cragonza.

No! The battalion order was given without knowledge of the situation on the south slopes of the Matajur. Unfinished business remained. . . . We ventured to attack in spite of our ridiculously small numbers.¹

— Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*

The perception of World War I is dominated by the Western Front trench warfare that followed the Race to the Sea, a series of outflanking attempts ending the capability to maneuver at the operational level. The resulting stalemate, based on the increasing importance of firepower, machine-guns and artillery compared to maneuver enforced a close coordination between the infantry and its supporting arms. This led to complex, precisely coordinated fire plans that stifled initiative of the ground forces.

However, this is not the whole story: On the Eastern Front the density of forces and the vast space allowed for operational level movements throughout the war, leading to a series of more or less successful envelopment attempts from the Łódź campaign to the Kerensky-Offensive.² Those battles were fought based on the doctrinal background and mindset described in chapter two of this paper (the selected phases overlap) and will therefore not further be analyzed.

At the tactical level synchronized methodical battle dominated the trenches while the exercise of initiative retained its position and finally rose to glory again with the techniques of deep defense and storm trooper tactics.

Doctrine Discussion

With the new realities at the Western Front the prewar doctrine had become inappropriate by December 1914. The 1906 drill regulations had pointed out that the infantry had to “herd its inherent urge for offensive advance. . . . Forward on the enemy, may it cost what it costs!”³ Utilization of the terrain was described on one page; the defense was seen as subordinate to the offense.⁴ The defense was static, the German Army reluctant to yield ground. To prevent the loss of terrain, the first lines of trenches were packed with large numbers of soldiers, which resulted in high losses during the intensive Allied preparatory artillery barrages.⁵ Therefore the Army High Command adapted the tactical doctrine on two occasions: In the winter of 1916-1917 the new defensive doctrine described the defense-in-depth concept and in the following winter the offensive doctrine was updated.⁶

Defense-in-Depth

When Ludendorff became the First Quartermaster of the Army High Command on the 20th of August 1916 he undertook intensive efforts to monitor the tactical developments at the front and within two weeks ordered the adaption of the defensive doctrine.⁷ Colonel Fritz von Lossberg had already determined that a report or order between front line and a division headquarters under battle conditions would take between eight and ten hours one way. The resulting interim development of the tactical

situation thus required giving full freedom of action to lower levels to enable an effective reaction. Hence frontline battalion commanders got autonomy to react to enemy attacks in their sector, and their regimental commanders were reduced to providing support and reinforcements. Divisions would have a comparable control for their sector and autonomy for operational level. Reinforcements were to fall under the command of the respective frontline unit, without regard of the commander's rank.⁸ Based upon the experiences and reports of different units and a French document captured in 1915 the *Grundsätze für die Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskrieg* (Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare) were developed.⁹ The defense-in-depth concept stressed the flexible reaction to enemy attacks.

For the troops the following is applicable for the battle: . . . The defender is not bound to one place; instead he is justified to fight mobile in the battlezone, which means to attack or withdraw whatever is required. . . . For tactical action best suiting the concept of battle a certain level of leeway has to remain with the leader—also the mid level leader. This is applicable to all branches. The conduct of battle according to this concept requires a lot of initiative [original emphasis].¹⁰

Battalion commanders got the authority to withdraw forces under pressure from the outpost zone, counterattack upon their own decision, and order other battalions in their sector as reinforcements to the front.¹¹ Low-level leaders and individual soldiers in the outpost zone were to independently shift from their trenches to strongholds to defeat the attacking enemy from flank or rear directions and conduct local counterthrusts (*Gegenstöße*) to expulse culminated enemy forces from the battle zone.¹² The field manual accordingly stated: “The strength, in the offensive defense too, does not lie in the masses of troops but in the skillful employment, especially in the coordination of

different weapons and the speed and energy of the action. Leadership—down to the squad leader—plays a crucial role.”¹³

Storm Trooper Tactics

The adaptations to the offensive doctrine were less groundbreaking: The storm trooper tactics combined the offensive spirit and willingness to sacrifice of the German Army with increased training on newly developed weapons, improved coordination of infantry and artillery and the concept of deep operations. The concept *Der Angriff im Stellungskrieg* (Attack in Position Warfare), published on the 1st of January 1918, became the basic document for the German offensives of 1918. Again a captured French exposé had been part of the development process as well as German units’ best practices.¹⁴ The fundamental idea of the Storm Trooper Tactics was the deep penetration of the enemy defense, the final objective being an operational breakthrough. Instead of destroying the enemy forces the attack sought to disrupt the defense, bypass strongholds and keep up the initiative with the assault units while follow on forces would reduce the strongholds and provide flank protection. The manual states:

The surprised enemy shall not reconstitute. His countermeasures have to be neutralized through a rapid advance of the attack. The assault has to be executed quickly, based on the knowledge that for the protection of flank and rear and the fire support care will be taken from behind. The danger that the drive of the attack gets lost is great. The culmination point has to be overcome through the energy of the leaders up front. . . . **Everything depends upon the quick and independent actions of all involved, based on the concept of operations as well as the follow-up of artillery and ammunition supplies.** [original emphasis]¹⁵

For the infantry, small unit initiative was crucial, while artillery support was centralized, short and precise and aimed at neutralizing enemy defense efforts instead of destroying

them.¹⁶ The advantage of having the ability to chose time and place of the attack and plan for details was not to restrain independent action.¹⁷

The German answer to the changing environment at the Western Front is remarkable as it was counterintuitive and contrary to the Allied approach of centralizing command, further synchronizing fire plans and subordinating the infantry to its support weapons. The spirit of initiative within the army was maintained as a value while the increased effectiveness of heavy weapons required a close coordination of maneuvering infantry and its support weapons. This allowed for timely reactions and the avoidance of devastating enemy firepower in defense and offense.

Execution of Initiative

The doctrinal discussion shows that the new and unexpected nature of combat at the Western Front led to a development of doctrine based upon analyzing the experiences and good practices of units on the ground. This inductive way of adapting doctrine naturally leads to less exciting findings in the review of the conduct of operations.

In his book *Infantry Attacks*, then Lieutenant Erwin Rommel describes the conduct of operations on the platoon to battalion level. In his accounts about the trench warfare in the Argonne and the High Vosges the first measures of the frontline practices that later made it into doctrine are traceable. He describes the difficulties of proceeding against the massive firepower of machine-guns, nurture an attack, and defend the terrain gained against enemy counterattacks, when the artillery fire sealed off the attackers from reinforcements and resupplies.¹⁸ In his subsequent portrayals from mid 1915, the use of terrain through infiltration and distinguishing between assault or storm squads, elements to seal off flanks, reduce strongholds bypassed by the former, handle prisoners, and

provide resupply in ammunitions or entrenching tools constitute the measures to overcome the before-mentioned challenges.¹⁹ The quotation at the beginning of this chapter shows that the elements of Storm Trooper Tactics developed for the trench warfare were also used in the mountain warfare, where the freedom to maneuver had not been restrained to the same extend. For the defense, it depicts the need to avoid enemy artillery and especially heavy mortar fire through thinning out the first lines and allowing for flexibility in the search for cover.²⁰

In his book *All Quiet at the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque describes the discipline required when the soldiers after their fighting withdrawal from the outpost zone had to stop and turn at the main line of resistance to eventually clear the outpost zone in a counterthrust.²¹ The chaotic situation in the elastic defense made the fire team or squad the element carrying the fight from strongholds in flank or rear of the enemy advance.²² Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Balck stresses that the initiative to withdraw from the outpost zone may not generally be surrendered to the troops because this tended to lead to a backwards surge, when the first positions were already cleared when facing small reconnaissance in force.²³ Well exercised initiative, on the other hand, stopped attacks of superior forces, if counter thrusts by small units threatened its flanks. He describes examples where small fire teams of one leader and two to three riflemen caught up to 200 prisoners through unexpected counter thrusts.²⁴

With Germany suffering from the consequences of the deadlock of attritional warfare on the Western Front, the idea to extend the successful techniques of offensive warfare from the tactical to the operational level was logical. The 1918 offensives in the end failed for a number of reasons, including a lack of operational movement, supply

capabilities, and resources. Gains based on random success of the attacking units at the tactical level, all operating upon initiative to keep up the drive of the attack, led to the need to man and defend large pieces of terrain absent of operational or strategic significance.²⁵

Conclusion

The creation of specific defensive and offensive doctrine for trench warfare does not constitute a general adaption of the understanding of *Auftragstaktik* similar to the developments described in chapter two. The fundamental understanding of initiative and independent actions of commanders remained unchanged. They were applied to the new circumstances of warfare at the Western Front to benefit from its advantages when avoiding the effects of enemy firepower became crucial. The leeway of junior commanders and individual soldiers to flexibly change positions within a defined zone to avoid the preparatory fires and defend based on the own initiative clearly constitutes an established understanding of category one initiative. The question, whether independent counterthrusts were an integrated element of the defense and thus also part of the category one leeway, or whether they constituted an independent action within the higher commander's intent is debatable. Assault or Storm Trooper units were starting off their attacks based upon detailed intelligence and planning. The freedom to operate as deemed necessary to overcome unexpected enemy strongholds or fields of fire, based upon the understanding that the forward commander has the best insight into the changing situation reflects the concept of the second category of initiative. Finally, the example of Rommel in mountain warfare quoted at the beginning of this chapter indicates that the spirit to act upon professional knowledge outside or against given orders was still intact.

It furthermore shows that this third category of initiative, previously only visible with large unit commanders, was also ingrained into junior officer's understanding of their freedom of action.

¹Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), 223.

²Citino, *The German Way of War*, 234.

³Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 81.

⁴*Ibid.*, 91-92, 112.

⁵Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine during the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1981), 10.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁸David T. Zabecki, "Defense in-Depth," in *The Encyclopedia of World War I, A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 342-343; German Oberste Heeresleitung, *Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege, in Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916/1918*, ed. Erich Ludendorff (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1921), 608-609.

⁹Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 13-14.

¹⁰German Oberste Heeresleitung, *Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege*, 607.

¹¹Zabecki, *Defense in-Depth*, 343.

¹²Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 15-16; German Oberste Heeresleitung, *Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege*, 618.

¹³German Oberste Heeresleitung, *Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege*, 619.

¹⁴Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 34.

¹⁵German Oberste Heeresleitung, *Der Angriff im Stellungskriege*, 642.

¹⁶Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 36-40.

¹⁷German Oberste Heeresleitung, *Der Angriff im Stellungskriege*, 645.

¹⁸Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, 57-59.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 66, 72.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 64, 69.

²¹Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (Cologne, Germany: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1959), 106-110.

²²*Ibid.*, 248-249.

²³Wilhelm Balck, *Entwicklung der Taktik im Weltkrieg* (Berlin, Germany: Verlag von R. Eisenschmidt, 1922), 269. The book was published after the war, therefore it is used in a double purpose in this thesis. The historical examples serve the understanding of the execution of initiative during the war while his recommendations have influence on the developments in the interwar period, which will be covered in the next chapter.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 277.

²⁵Williamson A. Murray, "The West at War 1914-18," in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare, The Triumph of the West*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 291.

CHAPTER 4

AN ARMY SHAPED FOR INITIATIVE VERSUS DETAILED

TACTICAL CONTROL BY HITLER

Ideally LT Delica, who was senior on the ground, should have taken charge. His glider, however, had landed a fair way to the south and his squad was busy dealing with its target position, a 75mm-gun casemate. Unable to contact [LT] Witzig or Delica, SGT Helmut Wenzel of fourth squad took command and established headquarters for *Sturmgruppe Granit* inside the machine-gun casemate, which his men had captured minutes earlier. SGT Wenzel . . . was fully familiar with the mission and continued with the plan. He had his radioman establish contact with [his company commander CPT] Koch in order to inform the overall commander when his men had taken their main objectives, as well as to gain situational awareness as to the whereabouts of the relieving troops. Meanwhile, the other squads had landed in proximity to their targets and set about dealing with them. As Witzig described it, “they didn’t need to ask questions. They had their orders, and they did them.”¹

— Nicholas A. Murray, *Capturing Eben-Emael,
The Key to the Low Countries*

The German 1918 offensives at the western front despite all shortfalls had proven the capabilities of the maneuver aspect of deep operations based on well-executed combined arms warfare but they had also shown the limits to operational mobility and reach. The same is true for the Allied use of massed tanks for example in the offensive at Cambrai. However, with the end of the war for all armies demobilization and the question how to best utilize the scarce resources became the challenges predominant to doctrinal considerations.

The regulations of the Treaty of Versailles reduced the German Army, now renamed the *Reichswehr*, to a 100,000 men strong lightly armed force—capable only of border security and internal control operations.² The task of demobilizing and reorganizing the *Reichswehr* went to General Hans von Seeckt, who became the chairman

of the Commission for the Peacetime Army Organization and subsequently the chief of the *Truppenamt*, the successor organization to the banned General Staff.³ Von Seeckt had been born in 1866 to a noble Pomeranian family and had received a civilian education rather than that of a cadet school. Enrolled into the Emperor Alexander Guard Regiment as of 1885 he was commissioned in 1887 and selected for the General Staff course at the *Kriegsakademie* in 1893. Broadly educated and well travelled he was highly regarded in the General Staff Corps and steadily rose through the ranks.⁴ During World War I, von Seeckt served initially as chief of staff at the army and army group level, saw maneuver warfare at the Western Front in 1914 and subsequently was transferred to the Eastern Front. He had made his reputation for successfully planning and executing major offensives, and countering enemy offensives through mobile defense.⁵ Although he was confronted with the gigantic tasks of downsizing an army while defeating a communist uprising on December 1st 1919, only one week after taking over the *Truppenamt*, he ordered a comprehensive study “to put the experience of the war in a broad light and collect this experience while the impressions won on the battlefield are still fresh and the experienced officers are still in leading positions.”⁶

The results of the comprehensive study provided the basis for the review of the doctrine that led to a new capstone doctrine, *Army Regulation 487 Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* (Command and Combat of the Combined Arms).⁷ Part One of the manual was published in 1921 and contained fundamentals of combined warfare; part two consisting of specific chapters for air and tank warfare, communications and logistics was issued in 1923.⁸ It lasted for ten years until its update in the 1933 *Truppenführung*

(Troop Leading) manual that mainly incorporated the emerging potentials caused by the rapid technological developments of weapon systems.⁹

Doctrine Discussion

The experience of the horrific attritional warfare in the static trench systems of World War I forced officers in all armies to search for ways to avoid such slaughters through decisive maneuver warfare. The different efforts were centered around technological means and their adequate application in warfare with the discussion about the role of tanks and the best form of air warfare as the most prominent topics. For this thesis those discussions are relevant only to a very limited degree because the German approach to doctrinal change sought to develop technological instruments as means towards the execution of concepts in the art of war.¹⁰

1921 Command and Combat of the Combined Arms

The *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* marks the German transition into modern doctrine. No longer, was the capstone doctrine a designated infantry manual that provided little reference to the supporting arms. The structure of the manual was fundamentally different, addressing the fundamentals of combined warfare first and integrating the modern means of warfare in its second part.¹¹ Subsequently more detailed manuals for the different arms were issued.¹² Interestingly the manual was not restrained to the capabilities and arms available under the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles; in his introduction to the manual von Seeckt instead explicitly stated that the knowledge and doctrinal understanding of the modern weapon systems is paramount, disregarding the fact that they might or might not be available to the *Reichswehr* in the next conflict.¹³

The aspects of *Auftragstaktik* were now handled more prominently in the first chapter compared to being covered in part two of the 1888 and 1906 manuals. The fundamentals of *Auftragstaktik* are not changed: “The foremost quality of a leader remains the willingness to take responsibility. All leaders have to constantly stay aware and inculcate in their subordinates that forbearance and dereliction weigh heavier than mistaking in the selection of an action.”¹⁴ This quotation can be found word for word in the 1906 regulations; the middle section of the respective part that warns against the risk of turning into arbitrariness is omitted.¹⁵ Instead, the description of when and why to deviate from orders is covered and explained more detailed:

The **mission** designates the objective to achieve. The leader may not lose sight of it.

The **situation** will seldom be clear enough to provide a detailed insight into the enemy disposition. Uncertainty is the general rule of war. . . .

Based upon mission and situation the **decision** is developed. If the mission does not suffice as a basis for own action and is obsolete through the events the [new] decision has to account for those developments.

Full responsibility for not executing or altering of the mission remains with the leader. At all times he has to act within the framework of the whole (*im Rahmen des Ganzen*). . . .

No deviation is to be made from a decision taken without a grave reason. In the vicissitudes of war inflexible adherence to a decision can be a mistake. It is the art of command to identify, when a new decision has to be taken. [original emphasis]¹⁶

As we see at this point, the concept of *Auftragstaktik* is well established, the changes between the 1906 and 1921 manual are marginal. The fact that the section about the risk of drifting into arbitrariness is left out seems to indicate that the execution of initiative during World War I did not come with the negative side effects that could be seen, for

example, in the Franco-Prussian war. Reasons for this may be the possibility for better communications or a more professional officer corps.

1933 *Truppenführung*—Troop Leadership

Truppenführung, written under the auspices of Generals Ludwig Beck, Werner von Fritsch and Otto von Stülpnagel, updated the aspects of modern weapons in the *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* according to the standing of technological development achieved by 1933.¹⁷ More significant from the perspective of this thesis however is the addition of the “Introduction section, with its fifteen highly philosophical paragraphs that set the manual’s tone.”¹⁸

The Introduction section’s paragraphs resemble highlights, of German understanding of warfare and doctrinal writing of the 100 years preceding the manual. They restate Clausewitz’s fundamentals about the human aspect of warfare, friction and the principle of the German art of war, the aim for the decisive annihilation of the enemy.¹⁹ The paragraph about leadership is again (as in the 1921 *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*) nearly a word-for-word copying from the 1906 manual.

Every leader in all situations must exert, without evasion of responsibility, his whole personality. Willingness to take responsibility is the foremost quality of a leader. It should not be aimed at making arbitrary decisions with disregard of the whole or not precisely following given orders and let know-all manner take the place of obedience. Autonomy may not become arbitrariness. Autonomy however, utilized within the right limits, is the basis of great successes.²⁰

The employment of soldiers and weapon systems in open, dispersed formations, which had become a rule rather than an exception during World War I and in the interwar period, led to an increased emphasis on the individual soldier’s autonomy. The manual states: “The emptiness of the battlefield (*Leere des Schlachtfeldes*) requires

independently thinking and acting fighters, who exploit every situation well considered, decisively and boldly, deeply convinced that success depends on each individual.”²¹

Comparing *Truppenführung* with its predecessor manuals’ respective sections, one sees that its description of autonomy turns back to the limitations of independence. The 1906 drill regulations had stressed the risk that an independent leader might go too far, the 1921 had made no clear reference to this risk and *Truppenführung* restates the danger of know-all-manner and arbitrariness.²² The necessity to actively develop the situation—again a draw from the 1906 manual—is extended from “all leaders”²³ down to every soldier:

From the youngest soldier upwards, independent employment of all spiritual, intellectual and physical power is stipulated. Only this way the full capabilities of the troops can be brought into effect in common action. . . .
Everyone, the highest leader as well as the youngest soldier has to constantly stay aware that forbearance and dereliction weigh heavier than mistaking in the selection of an action. [original emphasis]²⁴

The fact that autonomy and proactive action is described in two of the fifteen paragraphs of the introduction depicts the importance given to the topic.

Section 2—leadership—of *Truppenführung* describes the concept of *Auftragstaktik* in similar but more precise terms than the 1921 command and combat of the combined arms manual:

The **mission** designates the objective to achieve. The subordinate may not lose sight of it. A mission that contains multiple tasks easily distracts from the essential (*Hauptsache*).

Uncertainty about the **situation** is the general rule. Seldom can a detailed insight into the enemy disposition be won. . . .

Based upon mission and situation the decision is developed. If the mission does not suffice as a basis for own action and is obsolete through the events the [new] decision has to account for those developments. Whoever changes a

mission or does not accomplish it has to report this and takes sole responsibility for the results. At all times he has to act within the framework of the whole. . . .

No deviation is to be made from a decision taken without a grave reason. In the vicissitudes of war inflexible adherence to a decision can be a mistake. It is the art of command to identify in time, when and under which circumstances a new decision is required.

The leader has to allow for freedom of action of his subordinates as long as this does not endanger his intent. However, he may not leave decisions he himself is responsible for, to them. [original emphasis, substantial additions to 1921 manual underlined]²⁵

The changes to its predecessor seem to indicate that during the 12 years of training in the *Reichswehr* orders developed into too detailed and voluminous works restraining the subordinates' freedom of action. A reason for that may have been the practice to intensively train leaders for planning two levels above their actual position to allow for an expansion of the officer corps, once the limitations of the Treaty of Versailles would fall (or be ignored). The rule to report deviations from a given mission seems to reflect the growing capabilities of command and control, specifically the rise of radio communications identified early by the *Reichswehr* as an enabling function for mobile warfare.

Overall, *Truppenführung* did not introduce fundamentally new aspects of *Auftragstaktik*. As shown above, its fundamental philosophy was emphasized and prominently depicted in the introductory section of the manual. As a specific aspect, the requirement for individual soldiers' independent action was stressed more intensively. In addition, the manual seems to address leadership developments that emerged during the intensive interwar training of the *Reichswehr*.

Execution of Initiative

Although *Auftragstaktik* and initiative of the *Reichswehr* were a philosophy encompassing all levels of leadership, the executions of it were nevertheless subject to different circumstances or environmental factors. Initially, the division as the maneuver element of the corps constituted the boundary between the tactical and operational level, especially in the case of the tank divisions. They were meant to operate freely and accomplish tasks in support of the achievement of operational level objectives. Later on in the war, the sparse forces available for extensive sections of the front often meant that this task fell to *Kampfgruppen*—ad hoc battlegroups of different available units.

Tactical Level

The accounts of autonomous and aggressive execution of initiative of German soldiers and low level leaders in World War II are legion. The Combat Studies Institute publication *16 Cases of Mission Command* alone describes three cases of exemplary leadership and initiative during the opening days of the campaign at the Western Front in 1940.²⁶ The dependence of the success of the campaign in the west in 1940 upon the success of low-level leaders seizing key terrain shows the fragility and risk of its operational plan. Junior officers and non-commissioned officers gained the respect of their opponents through aggressive and proactive execution of initiative in absence of orders or if the changing situation required deviations from the mission.²⁷ Dirk Oetting describes a case study which may be more illustrative, than the famed stories of the early days at the Western Front: A mountain infantry staff sergeant and his platoon had been tasked to protect the flank of their battalion during the battles in the Caucasus Mountains in the Soviet Union in 1942. When the attack of the battalion stalled against strong soviet

defenses, the sergeant decided to deviate from his mission, bypass the enemy positions and attack into the rear of the enemy. Splitting up his forces under the command of squad leaders and extending the few soldiers of the assault squad over extensive terrain he relied upon the autonomous actions of his subordinates.²⁸

Not only during offensive operations, but also in the defensive operations of the war, *Wehrmacht* low-level leadership prevailed. The containment of the Allied bridgehead after the Normandy landing in 1944 was substantially based upon small *Wehrmacht* detachments defending actively in the dispersed engagements of northern France's hedgerow terrain.²⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Werner von Raesfeld commanded a *Kampfgruppe* in the attempt to counter the Soviet winter offensive at the Eastern Front in 1941/42. He asserts that the "homogeneous education of leaders of all ranks towards autonomy proved itself: Through creative action and the willingness to take responsibility within their given missions they contributed essentially to the reestablishment of a solid frontline."³⁰ Lieutenant Colonel von Raesfeld himself, when confronted with superior Soviet forces decided to defensively break contact with the enemy. He states:

The battlegroup, which had fulfilled its mission to prevent an outflanking maneuver against the corps for some days, was now threatened with encirclement. Against the necessary withdrawal stood a *Führerbefehl* (order by Hitler) that prohibited any retrograde movement under the threat of punishment by court martial. The Russian breakthrough had made my mission obsolete. I therefore saw it, **under analogous development of my mission**, as my obligation to preserve the battlegroup by leading it back through the last gap. I thereby was aware that I was acting against the *Führerbefehl*, but **after fulfilling my mission was serving the human duty to prevent no longer justified loss of human life**. [author's emphasis]³¹

This example depicts a tactical level commander facing the fundamental struggle between professional judgment and given order we see again in the next section of this thesis.³²

Commanders were with the ongoing war more frequently confronted with missions that

were no longer sustainable with forces and resources and bore the risk of annihilating units without substantial gains.

These examples can only provide an overview about World War II initiative at the tactical level. In his study *Fighting Power*, Martin van Creveld also points out how mission-type orders, freedom of action, mutual trust and the willingness to assume responsibility contributed to a high combat effectiveness of the *Wehrmacht*.³³

Operational Level

The execution of initiative at the operational level is for the Western Front closely connected to the discussion about tank doctrine and the operational concept itself. The *Sichelschnitt* (sickle cut) plan developed by General Erich von Manstein was built upon surprise and a quick decisive thrust through the difficult terrain of the Ardennes and across the River Meuse. It was risky and the traditionalists within the *Wehrmacht* leadership were highly skeptical about its success and doubted the underlying assumptions about the capabilities of the new tank weapon.³⁴ General Heinz Guderian was a proponent of the massed use of tanks within combined fighting teams, the panzer divisions. For him, successful command during the operation was also a way of proving the theories about the employment of tanks he had proposed earlier.

The *Sichelschnitt* operation proceeded as planned. Attacking on August 10, 1940, Guderian's corps had passed through the Ardennes within three days and on the next day—relying on air support of historic dimensions—crossed the River Meuse, thus avoiding the need for extensive artillery support which would have cost one to two additional days due to the constraints of the road network in the Ardennes. On the following day, August, 14 and while the bridgehead on the west bank of the river still was not secured, Guderian

attacked further westwards without prior approval of his superior, General Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist.³⁵ On August 15, von Kleist ordered a halt of the offensive to allow for the infantry to catch up. Guderian ignored this and on August 17, when personally confronted with that order by von Kleist, asked to be removed from his position. Kleist accepted the insubordinate challenge, although the tactical situation forced him to change his mind shortly thereafter. Reinstalled in his position only hours later, Guderian was ordered to keep his command post at his current position and only employ strong reconnaissance elements. He disregarded this order again, commanding forward and connected to his command post by cable line so that his advance was kept hidden from German signal intelligence.³⁶ General Erwin Rommel, commanding 7th Panzer Division in General Hermann Hoth's corps, attacked on Guderian's right flank. Tasked to clear the eastern bank of the River Meuse, he decided to cross the river upon his own initiative, which was successful on August 13. On the next day, Rommel's division was ordered to reinforce and secure the bridgehead that was still endangered by the possibility of French counterattacks.³⁷ Instead, Rommel attacked with the forces available during the next two days, opened a narrow path 120 kilometers deep into the French rear, disregarding the threat to his own flanks and rear, and lost communications with his superiors and despite the fact that the division was spread out over a large distance. The thrust ended up 40 kilometers deep in the rear area of the French Ninth Army Corps, leading to its disruption.³⁸ Although this example certainly shows a maximum of independent action by a commander, Oetting points out that the success justified the Rommel's action. Furthermore, independent action and seizing opportunities were generally seen as an

essential factor of success and therefore commonly encouraged or at least accepted within certain limits.³⁹

The acceptance towards autonomous decisions of commanders was abruptly withdrawn and turned into an inflexible system when Hitler issued a *Führerbefehl* (*Führer* order) on December 16, 1941, that forbade all retrograde movements, threatening disobedience with immediate court martial. The order constitutes the end point of a process of the disruption of the relationship between Hitler on one side and the *Wehrmacht* generals on the other. Hitler claimed that “[t]he army generals had totally lost their nerves. They were confronted for the first time with a war crisis while they had only won victories until then.”⁴⁰ When analyzing the cases of commanders disobeying or criticizing this order one has to set the general framework of these actions. Attempts to interpret the actions that will follow in this section as resistance against Hitler are false. The commanders named in the following cases strongly believed in following the Nazi government as part of their profession if they were not believers in the cause of the war. Nevertheless, they identified a responsibility towards their troops as part of their professional ethos as we have already seen in the case of Lieutenant Colonel von Raesfeld.⁴¹

On November 30, 1941 there was another huge crisis at the eastern front. The First Panzer Army seized the town Rostov at the lower Don River but a successful Soviet counterattack threatened the army’s overextended lines and it requested the permission to withdraw and consolidate. Hitler denied the request and ordered the army to hold its ground. Commanding General Army Group South Gerd von Rundstedt reported that he could not execute this order and requested a change of the order or his dismissal. Hitler

removed him from his position but had to accept the withdrawal, which was inevitable.⁴²

On the December 17, one day after Hitler had issued his *Führerbefehl*, General Heinz Guderian—always highly praised and liked by Hitler—reported that he would not hold ground if his unit was threatened with destruction. When he received the *Führerbefehl* two days later, he reported to his higher command: “I am willing to receive these orders and put them in the file. I will not further distribute them [to subordinate units], even if in danger of facing a court martial.”⁴³ Guderian travelled to Hitler to convince him to rescind the *Führerbefehl*. His army’s war diary documents his view of Hitler’s order:

The result of a rigid interpretation will unavoidably be cauldrons and with those the destruction of the force therein, which due to the lack of reserves cannot be relieved or received upon a breakthrough. The result can furthermore be the destruction of the army before the arrival of the announced reinforcements. . . . Fully aware of my responsibility I therefore want to point out the results of a rigid and verbatim execution of the *Führerbefehl* and request to be allowed to interpret it in the sense of the before mentioned [more flexible and terrain utilizing] manner.⁴⁴

Guderian’s request was denied, and he was relieved from his position on December 26, 1941. Also other generals followed their professional ethos and countered the *Führerbefehl*, which would have meant senseless death to thousands of soldiers:

Commanding General VI Corps, Otto-Wilhelm Förster, Lieutenant General Eccard Graf von Gablenz, Commanding General XXVII Corps, and Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Commander Army Group North. They all requested to be dismissed because they could not take it upon themselves to force the troops to hold ground when they were not sufficiently equipped and supplied and without a chance to counter Soviet breakthroughs and encirclements. General Colonel Erich Hoepner, commander Fourth Panzer Army, was sacked and expelled from the *Wehrmacht* when he disobeyed the order and withdrew his forces.⁴⁵

More tragic was the fate of Lieutenant General Hans Graf von Sponeck, tasked to secure the eastern portion of the Crimean Peninsula with the city Kerch to protect the rear of General von Manstein's Eleventh Army during the siege of Sevastopol. Two Soviet armies with strong naval support conducted amphibious landings on 26 December to relieve the garrison defending Sevastopol.⁴⁶ The two Red Army divisions and a naval infantry brigade were superior to the German units defending but the Germans were able to contain the initial landings and reduce some of the beachheads in the vicinity of Kerch. Nevertheless, Graf Sponeck requested on December 26, and again on December 28, to take his forces back to the isthmus of Paryut, a move that would allow for a more dense defensive line for his 46th Infantry Division.⁴⁷ Von Manstein denied both requests; after the war he stated that at the time he assumed that withdrawing from the peninsula would lead to a situation the army would be unable to cope.⁴⁸ On December 29, the Soviets conducted an additional landing with four divisions in Feodosia, in the south of the peninsula, which the defending German engineer battalion and its supporting units had no chance of containing. Graf Sponeck, realizing the danger of getting cut off with his units and aware of the threat to the rear of the whole Eleventh Army, decided to immediately break off the battle and retrograde to the isthmus to establish a new defensive line. He informed von Manstein, who ordered a halt to all rearward movements. However, this order was not received at Graf Sponeck's command post. He was relieved subsequently from his command by von Manstein and later sentenced to death by a military tribunal presided over by Hermann Göring.⁴⁹ Hitler changed the death penalty into a six year prison sentence; Graf Sponeck was nevertheless killed upon Heinrich Himmler's order in the wake of the failed July 20, 1944, plot against Hitler

despite the fact that Graf Sponeck was still imprisoned and could not have taken part in the conspiracy.⁵⁰

The assessment of Graf Sponeck's case is clear: The process and the harsh sentence combined with the fact that the pardon by Hitler was arranged prior to the court martial show that an example was to be made of Graf Sponeck to enforce the *Führerbefehl*.⁵¹ Ironically, Graf Sponeck's command had not been issued with the order at the time he made his decision.⁵² The fact that the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe Göring presided over a special senate of the *Reichskriegsgericht*—instead of an experienced Army general—underlines the political perspective of the case.⁵³ In addition, Lieutenant General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach, serving as a judge, was informed by Göring about the death penalty (and pardon) prior to the hearing but not told about the facts of the case.⁵⁴ The trial does seem to have been quick, but following the legal formalities; von Manstein claims that he and the Eleventh Army command did not know about the date of the process, nor had they been asked to provide their assessment of Graf Sponeck's actions.⁵⁵ A factor in the process may also have been that Graf Sponeck had been one of the officers speaking up as a character witness for General Werner von Fritsch in 1938.⁵⁶ The presiding judge had been Göring then also; he had harshly cut off the honorable but risky attempt of Graf Sponeck to unmask the political conspiracy against the senior Wehrmacht generals.⁵⁷

The professional judgment whether Graf Sponeck was right to withdraw his forces is quite clear: Although von Manstein claimed that his order to hold was correct, his reasoning for it is contradictory. Not only were there two different reasons to hold the peninsula, but von Manstein also argues that the reinforcements, Romanian units (the

different sources suggest a maximum of two brigades), would have been sufficient to counter the Soviet landing at Feodosia. On the other hand he claims not to have trusted the Romanian combat effectiveness and spirit, a suspicion that was proven by the events.⁵⁸ The detailed analysis of Eberhard Einbeck, who served as Graf Sponeck's Ia (G3 or operations officer) and was therefore directly involved in the decision-making, provides great detail in terms of personnel and equipment numbers, and the horrible Russian weather conditions that make the decision from a professional standpoint of the author of this thesis absolutely reasonable.⁵⁹ The Romanian Prime Minister Ion Antonescu and General Alfred Jodl came to the same judgment.⁶⁰ The only point of criticism is the fact that the radio link between von Manstein's army and the units on the Kerch peninsula was broken during the hours after Graf Sponeck's report about his decision to withdraw. Von Manstein claims that this was caused deliberately to avoid receiving another order to hold the peninsula.⁶¹ Einbeck provides several reasons; the telephone connection was disturbed; when the switchboard in the Soviet beachhead in Feodosia was destroyed, the weather conditions made the radio links unreliable and Graf Sponeck's command post did not have sufficient radio equipment to allow for an integration of the mobile command post that was used by Graf Sponeck while on the move over a distance of about 100 kilometers.⁶² Von Manstein himself summarized the principle at stake: "The case of Graf Sponeck depicts the tragic of the conflict between the obligation of obedience and the own assessment of operational necessities inherent to being a higher commander. . . . [The dismissal] did not happen because he had acted on his own authority. I have myself had to act often enough against operational directives

even of Hitler, to concede to my subordinates the right to act on their own authority if required.”⁶³

For the question of the limits of obedience the legal review of Graf Sponeck’s defense lawyer is instructive. His written pleading started with some general comments about the limits of the obligation of obedience, based upon historical cases and the military law. It then states: “The defendant acted with impunity, if he after thorough examination assessed that the order given no longer fitted to the situation and in its place substituted his own decision that fit into the operational intent of his superior known to him.”⁶⁴ Based on this thesis three questions had to be examined:

1. What was the situation when the defendant received the denial of the withdrawal?
2. How had the situation changed when he decided to deviate from the order?
3. Could he assume that his own decision would fit into the general operational idea of his army commander?⁶⁵

Von Mansteins statement and the scheme of Graf Sponeck’s defense lawyer probably provide the best summary of the dilemma senior commanders in the Wehrmacht faced during the rest of World War II. The depicted examples have however to be quantified; for each of the examples mentioned above there were also senior commanders, who were avoiding the conflict with Hitler, either not to endanger their career or because they were believers in the archaic Nazi ideology of the survival of the fittest race. The most prominent example may be Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus who suffered with the whole Sixth Army in the cauldron of Stalingrad instead of disobeying Hitler’s order and attempting to break out.

Conclusion

Auftragstaktik as a proven concept was carried from the end of World War I through the Interwar Period well into World War II. The combination of *Auftragstaktik* and the concept of breakthrough towards deep operations that had prevailed during the 1918 offenses and the integration of the emerging capabilities of modern weapons into it were the main focus of doctrinal change and training efforts in the *Reichswehr*. The developments in terms of the understanding of initiative were less groundbreaking—the need for autonomous actions was explicitly extended down to the single soldier. The everlasting risk of overly independent leaders still is a topic reflected with changing effort within the two pieces of capstone doctrine of this period. The 1933 *Truppenführung* names two topics that are still highly current nowadays, missions that encompass so many tasks that they do not provide focus and overly detailed orders that restrain the subordinate's level of leeway.

The execution of initiative consists of three major topics: At the lower tactical level junior leaders down to squad and fire team level earned high respect by their Allied counterparts through adaptive, aggressive, and autonomous actions, which seized opportunities and contributed to the high combat effectiveness Martin van Creveld describes in his comparative study.

At the operational level the agility of German offensive operations, against which neither of the Allies had means, initially led to great successes of the *Wehrmacht*. The capabilities of the panzer divisions—in fact combined fighting teams—not countered by equivalent units on the French, British and Soviet side allowed for deep penetrations and encirclements that were successful in decisively defeating large Allied formations. The

ability to create a clear main effort and thus massive superiority enabled the deliberate selection of the place of a breakthrough compared to the 1918 offensives where the tactical success could not be linked to operational level objectives. The examples depict, that the categories one and two of initiative were deeply engrained into the soldier's and leader's understanding of initiative.

When the war at Eastern Front could not be won in a Blitzkrieg stroke in 1941 it became more and more clear that the German resources were not sufficient for the extended land mass and ability to mobilize men the Soviet Union had. Commanders at the operational level and tactical leaders operating outside of a contiguous front subsequently faced missions that were overambitious for the forces and resources available. Hitler's *Führerbefehl*, restricting the withdrawal of forces against doctrine and the tradition of *Auftragstaktik* set up the conflict between obeying orders and losing soldiers and units without gains. The manual *Truppenführung* states about the issue of breaking contact:

An engagement can be broken off after its purpose has been achieved; when the circumstances require the use of units at another position where their redeployment seems more advantageous; when continuing the engagement may not lead to success; or when defeat can be avoided only by breaking contact.

The breaking of contact can be deliberate or forced, and executed on the decision of either the immediate commander or the next higher commander. Subordinate units should be informed of the reasons for a deliberate break in contact.⁶⁶

The actions of the commanders breaking contact against Hitler's order therefore acted in accordance with doctrine and the professional understanding of the category three initiative. Comparing the citation from the manual and the legal scheme Lieutenant General Graf Sponeck's defense lawyer used⁶⁷ on one hand, and the statement of

Lieutenant Colonel von Raesfeld explaining his motive⁶⁸ on the other, we see that the category three initiative consisted of two elements. Firstly, the professional doctrinal understanding to make independent decisions based upon the development of the situation and secondly the ethical element of the profession to preserve the subordinate soldier's lives if possible.

¹Nicholas A. Murray, "Capturing Eben-Emael: The Key to the Low Countries," in *16 Cases of Mission Command*, ed. Donald P. Wright (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 147.

²Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 367-368.

³James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 29.

⁴*Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁵*Ibid.*, 26-28.

⁶Hans von Seeckt to Truppenamt et al., December 1, 1919, BA/MA, RH 2/2275, quoted in Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 37.

⁷German Truppenamt, *D. V. Pl. Nr. 487, Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen (F. u. G.)* (Charlottenburg, Germany: Verlag Offene Worte, 1921). James Corum in Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 37, refers to this manual as Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms, the content however reflects leadership to a lesser degree than the mission command warfighting function and philosophy.

⁸Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 39.

⁹Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, ed., *On the German Art of War, Truppenführung* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 3.

¹⁰The technological developments and subsequent discussions about the best application will therefore only in so far be discussed within this thesis as they are relevant to the understanding and extent of initiative. For a comprehensive discussion of these topics see Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹¹German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, III-IV.

¹²Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 10.

¹³German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, 3-4.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵See page 19.

¹⁶German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, 9.

¹⁷Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 3. Like its predecessor, the manual is not constrained to the capabilities available at the time of its publication but assumes an army unrestrained by resources and international treaties. German Truppenamt, *H. Dv. 300/1, Truppenführung (T.F.)*, E.G. Mittler & Sohn, Berlin, Germany, 1933: II.

¹⁸Condell, Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 3.

¹⁹German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 1-5.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 2-3.

²¹*Ibid.*, 3.

²²See page 19 for the 1906 drill regulations and page 56-57 for the 1921 *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*.

²³Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 91.

²⁴German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 5.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁶Donald P. Wright, ed., *16 Cases of Mission Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013).

²⁷Dirk W. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik: Geschichte und Gegenwart einer Führungskonzeption* (Frankfurt am Main/ Bonn, Germany: Verlag, 1993), 205-206.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 209.

²⁹Examples for small unit battles against superior allied forces can be found in Max Hastings, *Overlord, D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 170-172, 179-181, 183-185.

³⁰Werner von Raesfeld, “Führung durch Auftrag oder durch bindenden Befehl,” in *Wehrkunde*, 1960, Heft 4: 167, quoted in Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 210.

³¹Raesfeld, “Führung durch Auftrag oder durch bindenden Befehl,” quoted in Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 210-211.

³²See page 63.

³³Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power, German Military Performance, 1914-1945* (study submitted to the Department of Defense, Washington, DC, 1980), 189-199.

³⁴Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 194-195.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 197-198.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 199-200.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 201.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 202-203.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 203-204.

⁴⁰Josef Goebbels, *Tagebuch (03/31/45)*, Part II, Vol. 15: 648-649, quoted in Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer, Die Deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion, 1941/42* (Munich, Germany: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2007), 332.

⁴¹See page 65.

⁴²Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 213.

⁴³Heinz Guderian, “War Diary Army Group Center, H.Gr.Kdo.Mitte, KTB Ia, 19.12.1941,” quoted in Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 329.

⁴⁴Heinz Guderian, “War Diary 2nd Panzer Army, ” quoted in Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 214.

⁴⁵Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 215.

⁴⁶David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed, How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 94.

⁴⁷Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 230.

⁴⁸Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn, Germany, Athenäum Verlag, 1955), 241; Eberhard Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck, Ein Beitrag zum Thema Hitler und seine Generale* (Bremen, Germany: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1970), 21. Mungo Melvin claims that the reasoning for von Manstein’s decision was that the Kersch peninsula, once evacuated would have to be taken back by a major offensive. Mungo

Melvin, *Manstein, Hitler's Greatest General* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 250. Both may be right and just represent either a more offensive or realistic view of the operations.

⁴⁹Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 241; Melvin, *Manstein*, 249-251; Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 230-231.

⁵⁰Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 245; Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 232.

⁵¹Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 232; Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 34, 53-57.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 233.

⁵³Norbert Haase, "Aus der Praxis des Reichskriegsgerichts, Neue Dokumente zur Militärgerichtsbarkeit im Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Vierteljahreshefte zur Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Karl Dietrich Bracher, Hans Peter Schwarz, 39. Jahrgang, 1991, 3. Heft/Juli: 285.

⁵⁴Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 39.

⁵⁵Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 40-45; von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 244.

⁵⁶Harold C. Deutsch, *Hitler and his Generals, The Hidden Crisis, January-June 1938* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1974), 335; Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 8-9. General Fritsch had during the so called Blomberg-Fritsch affair been accused of homosexual behavior, which in those days was against the German military law, and forced to retire from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Army as part of a political plot to increase the influence of the Nazi party over the Wehrmacht.

⁵⁷Deutsch, *Hitler and his Generals*, 346-347.

⁵⁸Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 241-242. The Romanian forces most likely consisted of a Cavalry Brigade with one motorized regiment and a mountain brigade. As soon as the Red Army attacked with tanks out of the beachhead, the Romanian units panicked. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 30.

⁵⁹Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 22-25.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁶¹Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 245.

⁶²Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 27-29.

⁶³Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 244. Von Manstein claims that Graf Sponeck had a psychological condition that would at that time no longer enable him to command

under the stress of the difficult situation the troops faced on the Eastern Front in the winter of 1941-1942. Einbeck on page 26 denies that Graf Sponeck had lost his nerve. He had planned to transfer him to a position similar to his at an army corps in a calmer section of the front. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 33. To v. Manstein's credit it also has to be said that he tried to achieve a pardon for Graf Sponeck after the court martial von which v. Manstein had thought would prove that Graf Sponeck had acted appropriately. He also persuaded the personnel office of the army to pay Graf Sponeck's family the full pension according to his rank. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 60. His account in his book however seems to be primarily driven by the aim to explain his decisions and actions to a post World War II audience.

⁶⁴Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 42.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 137.

⁶⁷See page 70.

⁶⁸See page 62.

CHAPTER 5

THE ETHICAL COMPONENT OF INITIATIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF UNITS TO INNERE FÜHRUNG

We have to understand that we cannot allow for technocracy in our armed forces, but that we have with priority to reflect on the ethical fundaments of our actions. This means especially that we have to break the consequences of such thoughts down to the every-day problems for the individual soldier, if *Innere Führung*¹ is to be an understandable concept for the soldier.²

— Wolfgang Schneiderhan, *Innere Führung,
A High Demand for the Practice*

After World War Two, the call for a German *Wiederbewaffnung* (re-armament) in the light of a strong presence of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe and the war in Korea brought a conflict for the planners of a new German Army. On one hand the aim for a quick build-up of the forces required the utilization of *Wehrmacht* personnel, on the other, the army of the new democracy had to represent a total break with Nazi ideology. The fact that the *Reichswehr* had failed to stand up against Hitler when he removed democracy discredited the concept of the *Reichswehr* soldiers banned from political participation through membership in parties and the right to vote. Therefore the decision was made that the new soldier would retain his citizen rights, including the right to vote and that he was to educate in a way that would make him an active defender of democracy against external and internal foes.³ This led to a reform of the German command philosophy that was not primarily aimed at countering technological or tactical developments as in the cases we have seen in the chapters 2 through 4 of this thesis. The citation of the German Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces that begins this chapter depicts that the reform was about creating the ability to make conscious decisions based on an

ethical foundation. It can only be fully understood against the background of the involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in war crimes during World War II, especially on the Eastern Front. The lost war had a fundamentally different dimension for the German population than, for example, the defeat by Napoleon in 1806 and the loss in World War I. The association of Germany with crimes against humanity made the adherence to ethical principles the prime objective of all actions of the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1950, when the initial planning for a German contribution to the defense of Western Europe started, the majority of the population rejected the legitimacy of German armed forces, just five years after the capitulation in 1945. Connections to the *Kaiserheer*, *Reichswehr*, and *Wehrmacht* were, in most respects, neither desirable nor practical.

Doctrine Discussion

The above-mentioned circumstances are reflected in the doctrinal understanding of command, control and leadership in the German armed forces. *Auftragstaktik*—having no ethical values in itself—became subordinated to *Innere Führung* as the overarching philosophy. Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, *Innere Führung* sets the tone stating:

Respecting and protecting human dignity are an obligation of the German state and thus the *Bundeswehr*. This obligation is at once the ethical justification and the limitation of military service. Values based on human dignity are also the foundation for the principles of *Innere Führung* and thus for legal norms within the *Bundeswehr* as well as the structure of its internal order [original emphasis].⁴

It further describes the underlying principles and elements of the philosophy.

Through *Innere Führung*, the values and norms of the Basic Law are realized in the *Bundeswehr*. It embodies the principles of freedom, democracy and the rule of law in the armed forces. Its guiding principle is the “citizen in uniform”.

Innere Führung thus ensures a **maximum of military effectiveness** and guarantees a **maximum of freedom and rights for soldiers** in the framework of our free democratic basic order.

The principles of *Innere Führung* are based on ethical, legal, political and social **foundations** and meet military **demands**. These foundations and demands shape the concept of *Innere Führung* and its areas of application. [original emphasis]⁵

In this system, the application of the principle of *Auftragstaktik* by leaders and individual soldiers is one of eight criteria for *Innere Führung*, constituting the leadership style that best conforms with the principle of the “citizen in uniform.”⁶ The manual underlines the positive effects of sharing responsibility and fostering active participation of subordinates on motivation, occupational satisfaction and operational readiness.⁷ Discipline is to be achieved out of insight instead of external pressure.⁸

The established element of *Auftragstaktik*, to provide an understanding of the reasoning for a mission through conveying the purpose and the overall scheme, becomes widened by the demand to also provide the subordinates with the necessity of a mission, especially when facing difficulties and hardships.⁹ With this, soldiers “will be able and prepared to act out of conviction in accordance with the mission, and will take into consideration wider objectives.”¹⁰ The new nature of warfare in Europe, with the next conflict likely to be fought with nuclear weapons, would require increased independence of soldiers at all levels. Disrupted command structures and the devastations and civilian casualties caused by the use of nuclear weapons against populated areas—the likely reality in nuclear war—would fundamentally affect the German soldier’s motives to fight—the broadened principles of *Auftragstaktik* would provide the soldier not only with the capability to autonomously fight in this environment but also with a deeper understanding of the wider objectives.¹¹

Overall, the establishment of *Innere Führung* constituted a necessary requirement for the foundation of German armed forces as part the Western European defense so shortly after the war. The integration of *Auftragstaktik* as an established command philosophy provided an ethical foundation for the actions of soldiers and leaders previously found in the execution of initiative as could be seen during World War II but not in the concept itself. *Innere Führung* also very early identified and implemented the positive effects of *Auftragstaktik* as a leadership and management method providing commitment and motivation for soldiers led through a surprisingly modern command philosophy.

Conclusion

The adaptations of the command philosophy conducted during and through the foundation of the *Bundeswehr* are different from those that had happened in the periods described in the earlier chapters of the thesis. The *Bundeswehr* built upon the established understanding of *Auftragstaktik* and the three categories of initiative that had been established in the one and a half centuries since the battle of Jena and Auerstedt. Therefore the adaptations address three different qualities added to the philosophy instead of changing the dimension in the established parts.

Most prominently, *Innere Führung* officially established the ethical dimension of actions of German soldiers and leaders representing the post World War II democratic German state. Breaking with the *Wehrmacht* as an institution the *Bundeswehr* held only the tradition of those officers high that had acted upon ethical principles. The link becomes obvious when the *Bundeswehr Luftwaffe* states:

Graf Sponeck in life was always trying to engrain into his soldiers spirit and conduct. He subordinated the *Diktat* of unconditional obedience to his conscience and his responsibility towards his soldiers. For this he let his life. To honor him a memorial stone has been set up in the Sponeck Barracks in Germersheim. . . . It shows a quotation of Field Marshal Moltke that appropriately characterizes Sponeck's actions: "Obedience is a principle. But the man stands above the principle."¹²

This depicts how the ethical perspective in the execution of initiative—shown by some commanders during World War II—became an official principle of the *Bundeswehr*.

Auftragstaktik—as the fundamental leadership style applied in the daily work within the *Bundeswehr*—is the second quality added. It provides a modern way of interaction between superiors and subordinates thus creating commitment and active participation throughout the ranks. It is therefore a motivational factor contributing to the role of the *Bundeswehr* as a competitive employer.

Last but not least the realities of a frontline state in a possible nuclear war directed the nature and role of *Innere Führung* and the established principle of gaining an understanding of the reasoning for a mission by the subordinates to provide a motive to fight for freedom and democracy despite the almost certain devastation in such a war.

¹The term *Innere Führung* cannot properly be translated into English. The literal translation would be "internal direction," the concept however covers in addition to providing an individual ethical guidance the whole spectrum of leadership development and civic education.

²Wolfgang Schneiderhan, Chief of Staff of the German Armed Forces, in a speech on the occasion of the scientific conference at the *Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr* with the topic *Innere Führung*, a high demand for the practice, June 20, 2003, in *Gesellschaft, Militär, Krieg und Frieden im Denken von Wolf Graf von Baudissin* ed. Martin Kutz (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004), 180.

³Karl Diefenbach, "Staatsbürger in Uniform, Ausgangspunkt und Ziel der Inneren Führung," in *Reader Sicherheitspolitik, Die Bundeswehr vor neuen Herausforderungen*,

ed. Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, FüS I 4, Dieter Buchholtz (Bonn, Germany: 1998), 20.

⁴German Federal Minister of Defense, *Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, Innere Führung (Leadership Development and Civic Education)* (Bonn, Germany: 2008), para. 305.

⁵*Ibid.*, para 301-303.

⁶*Ibid.*, para 316, 613.

⁷*Ibid.*, para 612.

⁸Helmut R. Hammerich, “Kerniger Kommiss oder Weiche Welle? Baudissin und die kriegsnahe Ausbildung in der Bundeswehr,” in *Wolf Graf von Baudissin, 1907-1993, Modernisierer zwischen totalitärer Herrschaft und freiheitlicher Ordnung*, ed. Rudolf J. Schlaffer and Wolfgang Schmidt (Munich, Germany: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2007), 130.

⁹*Ibid.*, para 614.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 614.

¹¹Hammerich, *Kerniger Kommiss oder Weiche Welle?*, 129-130.

¹²Luftwaffe web page, quoted in Loretana de Libero, “Tradition und Traditionsverständnis der Deutschen Luftwaffe,” in *Tradition und Traditionsverständnis der Deutschen Luftwaffe, Geschichte, Gegenwart, Perspektiven*, ed. Heiner Möllers (Potsdam, Germany: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, 2012), 17.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The aim of this work was to identify factors that historically have influenced or determined the acceptable extent of initiative during the application of *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies over the last two centuries. The thesis was that parameters have to be in place to qualify before the fact the acceptable degree of initiative rather than afterwards. Identifying these factors and parameters should serve discussions about the future use of *Auftragstaktik* and Mission Command, and specifically, *Auftragstaktik* used as the basis for Mission Command.

Parameters for the Limits of Initiative

The problem set of knowing before the fact if a decision upon one's own authority would be seen as appropriate execution of initiative or disruptive disobedience did not emerge until the concept of *Auftragsstaktik* had been fully established by the end of Moltke's age. During the nineteenth century in the Prussian and German Army, initiative of operational level commanders was seen as an objective with a value in itself, with a disregard for the outcome of an action. As long as a commander showed proactive leadership and *elan*, his actions were justified as part of the effort to fully establish this behavior. A supporting factor for this judgment, which can be found most exemplary in the editions of Moltke's writings published by the General Staff at the *fin de siècle*, was the fact that commanders who aggressively went after the enemy could trust in their neighboring units joining them and hence ensuring success. The contrast to the reluctance

of French commanders to act independently in 1870 provides good reasoning for this Prussian virtue.

The selected historical examples of the later periods depict the problem of identifying universal parameters. The only enduring truth for a commander acting independently would be that success justifies all measures. When contrasting the execution of the Schlieffen Plan with Guderian's and Rommel's successes in 1940 one cannot miss to ask oneself how today's judgment would look like, had a French counterattack cut off the dangerously exposed supply lines of those two German commanders. For tactical level initiative of the categories one and two—restrained to independently accomplish the mission or support the higher commander's intent respectively—the problem of identifying parameters does not seem to be correspondingly critical. It remains open however, how many cases of subordinates misjudging the situation or not understanding the higher commander's intent there are untold for each account of exemplary initiative.

The cases of the German generals dismissed from their position and in some cases court martialed for not obeying the *Führerbefehl*, issued by Hitler in December 1941, demonstrate the effect of a loss of trust by the political leadership. Although not successful in the show trial against Graf Sponeck, the legal scheme used by his defense counsel documents the professional understanding of the limits of initiative at that time.

Factors Influencing the Extent of Initiative

Several factors were instrumental in the development of *Auftragstaktik*. It began with the societal factors leading to mass armies of unprecedented size requiring independent actions by higher commanders who had to march separated and then

concentrate in time for the battle. In parallel, the increased accuracy and firepower of both infantry and artillery—a technological factor carrying through to World War I—led to the introduction of increasingly dispersed tactical formations on the battlefield. This encouraged low-level tactical initiative due to the need to fire weapons at one's own rhythm and to utilize the terrain independently. The necessary autonomy at the level of squads and fire teams meant a certain degree of independence was unavoidable—at least in situations where communications technology was relatively inefficient. An interesting interdependence developed between the cultural attraction of the German Army towards initiative and, the capability of operational level maneuver. Due to the cultural disposition of the German Army, tactics based upon initiative were selected as the answer to the stalemate at the World War I Western Front. This led to the reemergence of the capability of operational level maneuver in 1918, which then reinforced the predisposition towards initiative allowing for the exploitation of opportunities at an unprecedented level proving the value of both concepts. The professional, ethical element motivating initiative emerged in adverse circumstances during World War II allowed for the re-founding of German armed forces under the auspices of a democratic and ethical foundation.

A Holistic Approach to *Auftragstaktik*

When writing a historical paper with the aspiration to not only describe the past but contribute to current discussions, one has to ask what those contributions should be. The paper shows that *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies is a result of a long developmental process and that it consists of several facets. It is not within scope and possibility of this paper to elaborate on the challenges of the application of *Auftragstaktik* in armies grown with other command philosophies. A good source for the

interested reader is the work of the Israeli scholar Shamir Eitan, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British and Israeli Armies*. There are however some recommendations from a German perspective.

Auftragstaktik is the result of random and deliberate developments during the vicissitudes of last two centuries of German history. In its current form it is an all-encompassing command philosophy that informs critical aspects of service in the *Bundeswehr*. The adherence to this principle guarantees that individual soldiers and leaders at every level are trained and educated in the spirit and at the required level of quality to allow for mutual trust in the abilities and the capability to search for, identify, and exploit opportunities to gain and maintain the initiative. The establishment of the General Staff as an instrument to create the professional foundation for *Auftragstaktik* at the operational level serves as an example for this, as well as the training and education during the Interwar Period. In both cases the prerequisites for the successful execution of initiative were laid during peacetime.

The ethical foundation of *Auftragstaktik* is grounded upon a positive role model to adhere to instead of creating a way to behave professionally based upon regulations that restrict. This implies *a priori* trust in the “citizen in uniform” or candidate for officer or non-commissioned officer positions. Jörg Muth’s, *Command Culture, Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequences for World War II* describes the circumstances of this kind of education very well. The Prussian practice of treating officer cadets as mature and responsible beings created the self-confidence required for leaders acting autonomously upon firm ethical judgment.

The paper has also shown, that the development of *Auftragstaktik* has been determined by the realities the Prussian and German armies had to face—the influencing factors above depict this. It remains therefore necessary to keep sight not only of the different aspects of *Auftragstaktik* but also of the environment, the socio-political developments within and around an army and the doctrinal and technological developments on the battlefield. Rommel’s unplanned deep thrust for example is hard to imagine with the limitations of modern air support demanding a 48 hours advance synchronization of the airspace.

Auftragstaktik is therefore—although having come into being in a piecemeal fashion—a philosophy that is directly applicable only in the environment of the German Army. It roots in a Clausewitzian understanding of warfare and nested in a culture of mutual trust and tolerance to mistakes. It requires proficient leaders with a strong ethical compass who command through a decision making process laying more effort into the understanding of the problem compared to the perfection of a solution accounting for all eventualities. While this philosophy, if holistically applied, creates adaptive leaders and thus the flexibility in command and cognitive skills Meir Finkel describes as one requirement for the ability to counter surprise, the question whether a selective implementation in absence of the described prerequisites can be successful, remains at least debatable.

The Future of *Auftragstaktik*

Does *Auftragstaktik* have a future at a time where integrated command and control systems provide the opportunity to link the individual tank to the commander several levels up? Where a live video feed of the helmet mounted camera and the

capabilities of surveillance systems can provide the illusion of shared situational awareness across the echelons? The last decade of counterinsurgency operations that allowed for commanders focusing on the few maneuver elements in their area of operations that were in contact with the enemy seems to indicate that centralized control can work well. The increased joint integration at lower levels increases the benefits of preplanned operations that can be supported intensively by joint fires.

Facing a near peer adversary the next time, western armies could be forced to restrict the use of their command and control systems to avoid detection. Cyber warfare could disrupt the friendly networks forcing the armed forces to use less sophisticated systems. It is more than questionable that centralized command would work once the majority of subordinate units get engaged with the enemy simultaneously—the best commander and the best staff might get overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information. How sophisticated is the situational awareness provided by a video stream?

Other aspects of *Auftragstaktik* demand attention too, when considering its future role: How can armed forces develop leaders instead of managers or administrators if they do not allow for junior leader's autonomy? How can they compete with other employers if service in the armed forces is determined by restrictions and does not require the use of the own intellectual capabilities? *Auftragstaktik* as an overarching command philosophy provides the opportunity to develop a military that has sustainable access to adequate human resources and is capable of coping with the surprises from future conflicts

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